

QUEEN CLOCKWORK



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QUEEN OF CLOCKWORK

KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES ALICE IN WONDERLAND BOOK

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CONTENTS

1. [12 August](#)
2. [13 August](#)
3. [14 August](#)
4. [15 August](#)
5. [16 August](#)
6. [17 August](#)
7. [18 August](#)

[After the Happily Ever After...](#)

[A NEW FAIRYTALE ANTHOLOGY](#)

[Join us](#)

[A note from the author](#)

[The Kingdom of Fairytales Team](#)

[About J.A. Armitage](#)

[About Zara Quentin](#)



KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES

You all know the fairytales, the stories that always have the happy ending. But what happens after all those storybook characters get what they wanted? Is it really a happily ever after?

Kingdom of Fairytales is a new way of reading with one chapter a day and one book a week throughout the year beginning January 1st

Lighting-fast reads you won't be able to put down

Read in real time as each chapter follows a day in the life of a character throughout the entire year, with each bite-sized episode representing a week in the life of our hero.

Each character's story wrapped up at the end of every season with a brand new character and story featured in each season.

Fantasy has never been so epic!

12 AUGUST



The pocket watch lay heavy in my hand as I brushed my fingertips over its polished metal. The watch cover was closed, so I couldn't see the clock face, but that didn't matter. The regular *ticking* reverberated through me. Standing in the middle of the shop, I *felt* it.

High wooden ceilings and tall plate-glass windows displayed the finished, half-finished, and just-started inventions that stocked the *Emporium of Mechanical Gadgetry and Invention*. The Emporium boasted clean benches and neatly arranged gadgets. Everything shone. It impressed glancing customers with the owners' mechanical prowess. Only I knew what worked and what didn't.

Inside the pocket watch, tiny gears, springs, wheels, and mechanisms worked together to make the hands move in time. It worked perfectly.

"Are you sure the lass is up to this?" Mr. Pillar blew a ring of smoke from the cigar he held between two fingers. I wrinkled my nose as the pungent smell wafted through the small shop. "She's not even looking at it."

I glanced at my oldest friend, Chesh, Mr. Chet Cheshire, the son of the elder Mr. Cheshire, who owned the Emporium. He grinned and patted Mr. Pillar on the shoulder.

Mr. Pillar had the look of someone softening around the edges with age. He had coiffed his gray hair into fashionable curls around his face, and he wore a three-piece suit of green pin-stripes, carried a cane, and wore a single eyeglass, which made one of his gray eyes appear twice the size of the other. Both his haughty air, his outlandishly fashionable style, and the

embroidered family crest on the lapel of his suit marked him as a member of an old family of the Forge.

“If Miss. Rowntree can’t fix your watch, nobody can,” Chesh assured Mr. Pillar.

I flipped open the lid to look at Mr. Pillar’s ancient pocket watch—a family heirloom, apparently—noticing the beautiful face inlaid with rubies. The scarlet jewels were a sign that the late Queen of Hearts favored Mr. Pillar’s ancestor.

People rarely displayed their allegiances so readily to strangers.

“It is a beautiful watch, sir,” I murmured. “You said it needed fixing?”

Mr. Pillar snorted, raising himself up to his toes, then rolling back on his heels as he huffed another lungful of cigar smoke. “Look at it!”

I frowned. “It appears to be keeping time.”

Mr. Pillar jabbed his cigar at me, narrowly missing burning my hand. “Exactly—not one second off.” He turned to Chesh. “You might be right about her.”

Chesh beamed at me. “I’m always right, sir.”

Mr. Pillar chuckled. “Now that we understand each other, Miss Rowntree, send word to me when it’s fixed. Mind you, don’t delay—I’m eager to have it back where it belongs.” Mr. Pillar patted the empty pocket of his waistcoat where he usually kept his pocket watch.

“You mentioned that earlier.” I closed my eyes briefly as I rubbed at my forehead, considering the puzzle. As Mr. Pillar turned to exit the shop, I forced myself to ask the obvious question: “If your watch is keeping time, what needs fixing?”

Mr. Pillar’s eyes bulged. He glanced behind his shoulder, then stepped closer to both of us. “I’ve told you,” he whispered, jabbing his cigar so that the ash floated in the air. “It’s an antique watch. It hasn’t worked for 18 years. Not since...” His eyes widened so suddenly that his eyeglass popped out and dropped to the floor. Mr. Pillar looked over his shoulder again at the empty shop, the whites of his eyes showing. “Not since the Queen... fell.” His voice was so low that the last words were barely audible.

I stared at him. “Died, you mean.”

Mr. Pillar gasped. Like many of the older residents of the Forge, he was afraid to talk about the late Queen. I caught myself before I rolled my eyes, and glanced at Chesh, expecting him to share my bemusement. My friend

was still smiling, but a crease between his eyes showed he was as puzzled as I was. I glanced at the pocket watch that lay heavy in my hand.

“Are you saying...?” I started.

Mr. Pillar interrupted. “Suddenly—this morning—that watch started working again. With no warning at all!”

I brushed my thumb over the clock face, the problem suddenly taking a different shape. A bell tinkled as Mr. Pillar wrenched open the door.

“Make it stop, Miss. Rowntree. That’s all I ask.” Mr. Pillar’s eyes darted from me to Chesh, then back again. He tipped his top hat, turned his back, and hurried away.

“Quite mad.” Chesh said, grinning as he hooked his thumbs into the pocket of his gray waistcoat. Never underdressed, he wore a black frock coat over gray trousers, and a necktie around his high-collar shirt, while his top hat rested on the counter. He’d combed his mane of curly blonde hair to the side, and his green eyes twinkled. “I can’t imagine you’ll have trouble with that request.”

“I’m not breaking a perfectly good watch.”

Chesh chuckled. “Just let it wind down.”

I turned my back and reached for the small clutch bag that I’d set down on the bench.

“Let me,” Chesh said, darting out to reach around me for my bag, in a manner that had him lean over my right shoulder.

I started at the gesture as it brought to mind a memory of a dream.

Dark eyes stared into mine, two pools of fathomless darkness. A mouth opened, and white, gleaming fangs sank into the soft flesh at the base of my neck.

I spun around, dropping the pocket watch as my hands clutched at my throat. For a moment, I was there, in the grips of a vampire, his teeth sunk deep into my skin.

“Ivy?” Chesh stepped back, his head cocked to the side. “Are you all right?”

I blinked several times before the strange, pale face was replaced by Chesh’s familiar one.

“You startled me.”

“Sorry.” Chesh bent down to pick up Mr. Pillar’s watch. “You might break it if you treat it like this.”

I examined the watch again, hoping it wasn't damaged. Satisfied, I slipped it into my clutch.

Chesh straightened his frock coat, settled his top hat on his head, then crooked his elbow at me. "That's enough seriousness. I have a desperate need for a new waistcoat. Perhaps shoes, as well. I shall insist upon your company, and your opinion on the subject."

I placed one hand at his elbow, using the other to smooth my waistcoat and skirts, as I let Chesh open the door for me and lead me out of his shop.



I ran my finger along the inner seam of a vest, examining the stitching. A fine piece of tailoring, as I expected from one of the finest tailors in the Forge.

"I trust nothing is amiss?"

I smiled at the impeccably dressed tailor, Mr. Gerrod, knowing he recognized me as an aesthetic inspector—one of many employed by the President to examine public places, including businesses, to enforce the rigorous aesthetic standards required by law.

"Not at all, sir," I replied. "I'm not working today. I'm admiring your wares."

Mr. Gerrod dipped his head in recognition of my compliment. "In that case, may I suggest this deep indigo would complement your unusual eyes? I could make you a dress worthy of your beauty."

"Of that, I have no doubt," I answered about to refuse his offer. Pearl, my non-identical twin, always made sure my wardrobe was bursting with clothes, but I took another look at the rich color of the fabric and hesitated.

"That color suits you," Chesh came to stand behind me. "I must insist you take Mr. Gerrod up on his generous offer."

Mr. Gerrod bowed. "We have your measurements on file, Miss. Rowntree," he said and hurried away before I changed my mind. I turned an exasperated look at Chesh.

"I can't have you wearing the same dress two times in a week," he said, shrugging. "Pearl would have a fit."

"I could hardly wear the same dress twice in a month."

“If you did, it would be splashed all over the front page of The Forge Hart. Imagine the gossip!”

I threw my head back and laughed. Mr. Gerrod raised an eyebrow as he glanced over at us.

“Shush, you’re causing a commotion,” Chesh scolded. “Now, tell me—does this coat become me?”

Chesh was trying on a new outfit—a frock coat in a deep green, over a yellow-gold vest, and fitted black trousers. He stood in front of me, seeking affirmation. Hovering in the background, the tailor’s young assistant stared appreciatively at him. A tall man, Chesh cut a fine figure in a suit, and his cheerful, bubbly persona added to his handsome charm. He turned heads wherever he went. Pearl had, more than once, asked me whether I fancied Chesh. I had answered my twin sister firmly in the negative. He was my closest friend, that was all.

“You know it does,” I answered Chesh. “The green brings out your eyes.”

Chesh straightened his shoulders as he turned to catch his reflection once more in the mirror.

“Very handsome,” the assistant blushed deeply as she offered her opinion.

“I shall take it,” Chesh smirked at her, as she helped him remove the coat.

While Chesh returned to the changing rooms, I meandered among the displays once more, trailing my fingers lightly over the soft, textured fabrics.

The memory of my dream nagged at me, and I dwelt on the dark eyes that had looked straight into my soul. I wrapped my arms around my waist, feeling suddenly exposed. I dreamed often—silly dreams that flitted from my mind as soon as I awoke—but this one was different.

The perfect curve of the vampire’s lips, as red as fresh blood, parted, revealing his sharp fangs. He leaned forward and dipped his mouth to the base of my neck.

I squeezed my eyes shut, my breath becoming short. I scolded myself as I took several deep breaths.

A hand touched my elbow. My eyes flew open to see Chesh staring down at me.

“Ivy?” he whispered, his eyes darting over to the counter where the assistant was carefully wrapping his new clothes. “Are you ill?”

I pushed the images from my dream away. “Nothing a little air won’t fix. Are we visiting the cobbler?”

Chesh grinned, flashing straight teeth. “I can’t wear shabby, old shoes with a new outfit.”

I snorted, making a point of staring at his black shoes, polished to a shine.

The shop bell tinkled as we stepped out onto the neat cobblestones. Sixth Avenue was lined with shops of all kinds. One of the main streets of The Forge, it was framed by tall buildings that sprung up from each side to tower over the pedestrians, blocking all but the midday sun and casting almost perpetual shadows.

Despite the shade, the late summer heat was oppressive. I flicked out my fan with my spare hand as a trickle of perspiration dampened the collar of my shirt.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question, Chesh?” I asked.

Half of his mouth quirked up. “You’ve never needed permission before,” Chesh replied.

“Have you ever met a vampire?”

Chesh laughed out loud. “Of all the things you might ask me—a vampire?” He paused for a moment to consider. “Perhaps once... in a bar.” He pulled at the collar of his shirt, and I noticed a flush in his cheeks, which I put down to humid heat.

“I haven’t,” I murmured, those dark eyes coming once more to mind.

“I should hope not.” He raised an eyebrow. “The city would be alight with gossip if you were to keep company with vampires. Anyway, they keep to their own.” Chesh stopped in front of *Broderick’s Boots*. “Here we are!”



He insisted on a new pair of boots for me to match my new indigo dress. Mr. Broderick took the measurements, then I settled down in a chair in the shop's front, gazing out of the window, while Chesh tried on a pair of shoes he’d ordered a week before.

The new soles clicked on the floorboards as he paced. His voice wafted through the store and, though I couldn't hear his exact words, I imagined him discussing the fit and the spots where the shoes rubbed his toes. I'd shopped with Chesh often enough to know how he fussed about shoes. I'd be dragged back to the cobbler at least once more before Chesh agreed to take delivery of his order.

I let my gaze wander over the street outside. The buildings were stone and timber, with brightly painted shutters and doors. Once all red, according to the late Queen's taste, now they boasted bright yellows, pinks, greens, blues, and purples. In the late afternoon, the residents of Melfall, capital of The Forge, were settling in at the teahouses and cafes that spilled out onto the footpaths.

I let my eyes wander, smiling at the sight of a woman in a frilly, pink jacket and skirt, wearing a wide-brimmed hat, and walking a flamingo on a leash. In the middle of the avenue, a man in a bright yellow suit rode a black-and-white striped zebra. Behind him, a man stepped up to a nearby doorway. He was tall, his features obscured by his hat, but something about him snagged my attention—even more than the man on the zebra or the woman with the flamingo. I sat straighter, peering at him. He seemed familiar—the pallor of his skin and the darkness of his hair reminded me of the vampire that haunted my dreams.

It can't be him, I told myself. It's too early for a vampire.

I glanced up. The late afternoon sun had dropped below the line of the buildings, casting the street into complete shade. Would a vampire risk the fading daylight? I didn't know.

My heart hammered, and I raised a hand to my neck to trail my fingers over my skin.

Then, the man turned, exposing his profile: a hooknose and a long forehead.

Seeing imaginary vampires? I sighed, shaking my head at my foolishness. *What is wrong with me today?*

I glanced at the teahouse across the road and decided to insist that Chesh accompany me for refreshment. After all, I'd waited for him in shops for the entire afternoon. I fiddled with the lace on my clutch, then pulled out Mr. Pillar's watch, and turned my mind to its puzzle to pass the time.

I closed my eyes, concentrating on the watch. I imagined the mainspring, the gear wheels, the escarpment mechanism, and the balance

wheel—their minute components working together to power the hands on the face of the watch. Without even opening the cover, I felt each of the tiny components moving to make it tick. I knew there were fifteen small jewels inside, carefully placed to minimize the wear and tear of the moving parts. It was a quality watch.

It worked perfectly.

I let my chin fall to my chest. I couldn't break this beautiful antique watch. Surely, someone in Mr. Pillar's household—a servant, perhaps?—had wound the watch when they should not have. When the mainspring lost its compression, the parts would go still again. When that happened, I decided, I would return the watch to Mr. Pillar without charge.

I slipped the watch back into my clutch and opened my eyes.

A large playing card stood on the other side of the cobbler's window. A rectangular body with metallic arms and legs and blinking red lights peering out of a metal orb for a head. On its chest was a single red heart.

My mouth fell open.

A Heart. A legend of the old stories—a soldier of the late Queen's ruthless army.

I clamped a hand over my mouth as I sucked in a breath and stood so abruptly that I knocked over the chair.

"Ivy?" Chesh called out from the back of the store.

The lights in the Heart's eyes blinked, then its whole body turned, and it marched along the street.

I yanked open the shop door and burst out onto the street.

The Ace of Hearts had disappeared.

I blinked, staring at the cobbled street where it should have been. People meandered along, in twos and threes, talking amicably as they looked in shop windows. Others settled into the restaurants and cafes for an early evening meal. A few delivery boys scurried along the street carrying packages to their new owners.

No one else had seen the Heart in the middle of the street.

"Ivy?" Chesh rushed out of *Broderick's Boots*, uncharacteristically disheveled. "Are you alright?"

He took my hands, as though I might collapse. The heat of the late afternoon pressed against me, and I scrambled for my fan, flicking it open to stir some breeze around my face.

"I saw..." I looked along the street. "I thought..."

“It’s unbearably hot. Let’s take some refreshment.” Chesh looked around, and his eyes lit up. “Tea?”

I was still searching for the Ace of Hearts when someone shrieked in the distance. Chesh frowned, his usual smile absent. “The city is going mad in this heat. Perhaps I should take you home?”

A few people hurried along the street, pulling their hats over their brows, and avoiding eye contact. One was weeping. Above street level, brightly painted shutters slammed shut. Mr. Broderick peered out of his window, then flipped the sign on his door to “Closed.”

“The Pinnacle!” a man called out, hurrying away from the circular marketplace in the center of Melfall. In the very center of the market, a clock tower, called the Pinnacle, rose to overlook the city.

I knew, from childhood lessons with my tutor, that the Pinnacle’s clock hadn’t sounded since the defeat of the late Queen, a little over eighteen years ago.

“What was that man talking about?” I asked Chesh, who had a firm hand on my elbow. Faintly, as though the very heart of the city was beating, I felt the ticking of a clock.

“I don’t think—”

“I’m perfectly fine,” I said, shaking off Chesh’s grip. I straightened my shoulders and strode towards the marketplace.



I stepped quickly along the cobblestones of Sixth Avenue, dodging people hurrying in the opposite direction, determined that Chesh wouldn’t prevent me from seeing the Pinnacle for myself. My heart thudded in my throat, and a sense of urgency came over me.

Those fleeing the scene were older—several were weeping, and one had collapsed and was being carried away. But I wasn’t the only one drawn to the commotion in the city center. Other young people saw the fuss and spilled into the streets.

The buildings towering over the avenue, suddenly took on the glow of the pink clouds of the early evening sky where the avenue flowed into the open marketplace.

Clusters of people stood, staring upward at the interlocking struts of the tower of wrought iron that rose like a needle from the middle of the cobbled market. At the top, the great clock stared dispassionately over the city.

The Pinnacle was an impressive structure, standing taller than any other in the Forge. If one climbed to the top, one could see across Melfall's perimeter walls, all the way to the distant boundaries of the kingdom where The Forge met Urbis to the north-east, Oz in the north-west, and the bright blue waters of the Great Ocean to the south.

I had never climbed the Pinnacle. No one did—not since the late Queen's demise when citizens of The Forge had toppled the enormous wrought iron heart that had once crowned the clock tower. Once the symbol of the late Queen's power had smashed into the courtyard below and the clock had stopped ticking, the citizens had pretended the Pinnacle didn't exist.

The ticking was louder now, and I covered my eyes from the late afternoon glare as I stared up at the tower. The hands of the clock moved, unmistakably keeping time.

For eighteen years, the clock had been stopped at 4:17pm. Now, the clock was ticking again. It read 6:54pm.

I pulled Mr. Pillar's pocket watch out of my clutch bag and flicked open the lid.

6:54pm.

I held up the watch so I could see the face of the pocket watch, next to the enormous face of the clock in the tower. I gasped. The hands were ticking in unison.

13 AUGUST



I brushed a curl from my face as I leaned over a yellowed newspaper spread across the large bench in the reading area of Alice's Library. The bench was beautifully carved, with small animals—mice, birds, rabbits, and even a caterpillar were engraved around the edges of the dark wood.

Around the long bench were rows of books about The Forge's history. More than that, it held every copy ever printed of The Forge Hart, the daily newspaper, since it started printing over thirty years ago. Alice had set up the library for the citizens of Melfall, but people rarely used it. Not that I minded—the solitude made it one of the few places I came to think.

The fragile newspaper rustled as I turned the wrinkled pages. I had started my research at the time of the late Queen's demise, about eighteen years ago, and was working backward, searching for any mention of the Pinnacle, how it's clock worked, or who had been responsible for building and maintaining it.

I skimmed the tiny text for stories about the stoppage of the clock, though the logical explanation was whoever had maintained it during the late Queen's reign had stopped once the Queen was dead. Someone had wound the Pinnacle's clock again. Why else would it tick?

I flipped over another page and huffed. There was no information in any of these newspapers about the clock's operation or maintenance.

Instead, I found a sketch of the late Queen, standing on the balcony of the Pinnacle with her army of Hearts lining the circular marketplace, surrounding the gathered citizens. Ignoring the other details of the picture, I

peered at the Pinnacle. A raw, but beautiful structure, it looked much like it did now—a metal skeleton with no skin to cover its bones.

I scanned the text. An announcement about the war effort—the Queen had constantly waged war against the other eleven kingdoms—and a triple beheading. A small article wrote that Mr. Finley Knave, Duchess Ada Thornton, and Mr. Gordon Taylor were all beheaded for the crime of displeasing the Queen.

In every edition, an article announced the day's executions. I shook my head. The late Queen had been fond of beheading her subjects.

I turned the page again and sighed.

The door flew open, sending a gust of breeze into the room. I slammed my hands on the papers to stop them from flying away.

"I knew I'd find you here amongst the dust." Pearl's voice was loud against the silence of the library. She gasped. "You're not even dressed!"

I glanced down at myself and drew my dressing gown around me. "I was reading."

Pearl shook her head as she walked over to the reading bench, her nose wrinkled in distaste as she stared at the old newspapers spread over the surface.

"Decades-old newspapers? Honestly, if anyone saw you like this, it would be a scandal. Nobody has seen you, right?"

"In here?" I smirked. "Not a chance."

My beautiful twin sister pursed her lips. Her long, blonde hair fell over her shoulders in ringlet curls, and an ornate fascinator perched on the side of her head. She wore a pink vest over a white shirt with lace frills and a skirt over full petticoats. Perfectly put together—as always.

"Put away those musty things and get dressed," she said. "You must accompany me to the bank."

"Again?" I raised an eyebrow.

"I haven't withdrawn my stipend this week. I have an aesthetic regimen to uphold, you know. This," Pearl waved a perfectly manicured hand towards her face and hair. "Doesn't just happen, you know."

Pearl spent four to five hours, at least, every day on her daily bathing, dressing, facial, manicure, pedicure, massage, and other hair and skin treatments. She wasn't alone. Most citizens held to strict beauty regimens and wouldn't leave their houses if even a hair was out of place. The Forge

Hart was always full of articles about maintaining youth and beauty, and advertisements for potions promising wonders with every application.

I sighed. “Can’t your maid accompany you?”

Pearl glared at me. “You cannot waste your life in this dreary place.”

“I like it,” I replied.

“You should claim your own stipend.”

I raised an eyebrow. We’d had this conversation many times before. “I don’t need it. I work for Mother, and I sell my watches.”

“Such a waste of time,” Pearl said. “You are so beautiful—you should live on the stipend. You’re taking a job from someone who needs it.”

I rubbed at my forehead. There was no point in arguing with Pearl or any other citizen who lived on the aesthetic stipend. Why should the beautiful work when they performed such an important public duty—improving the lives of others by making the city more aesthetically pleasing?

“I hear the roads of Oz are paved in gold,” I said, raising an old topic to distract her. “Maybe we should go there instead.”

Pearl didn’t take the bait. “Traveling in this heat would make my hair frizz,” she replied. Then she folded her arms across her chest. “Besides, if you want to travel, you must claim—and save—your stipend.”

I sighed, knowing that was true enough. “Fine, I’ll come,” I said, then held up a finger. “To sell a watch and collect my wages.”



White, stone steps led to the arched entrance to the First Forge Bank. Unlike the wooden buildings that leaned up against each other along the narrow streets of The Forge, the bank was an imposing stone building, its grand entrance marked with carved stone knights standing to attention. As Pearl and I stepped inside, the entrance hall danced with the colors reflected by the sunlight shining through the stained glass dome overhead.

Once the Royal Bank of Hearts, the bank had contained the late Queen’s Treasury. Early in her reign, the late Queen—who loved all things beautiful—had endowed a lifelong stipend on the most beautiful among her subjects. She’d also punished those who did not adhere to her standards of beauty, usually with execution. The stipend became entrenched and, by the time she

was deposed, the aesthetic stipend was the main income for the most influential people in The Forge.

The new president—my mother—Alice Rowntree—hadn't abolished the stipend with the formation of the new republic, mainly because she was afraid the citizens wouldn't survive another revolution if Melfall's beautiful citizens rioted against the threat to their livelihood.

On our eighteenth birthday, earlier in the year, Pearl and I had come of age, with the benefit of collecting the stipend. On that day, we'd both come to this building, intending to claim our payment, but I'd decided against it at the last minute.

I'd insisted that the payment was unfair since everyone got paid a different amount depending on how beautiful they were. In truth, when Pearl had received the maximum stipend, marking her as one of the most beautiful women in the Forge, I had felt a sudden stab of fear.

Pearl was blonde, with creamy skin, full lips, and a figure with curves in all the right places. She instinctively knew how to do her hair and makeup to bring out her best features. I was the plain sister. The sister that people noticed only if they tore their eyes away from Pearl. In that moment, I hadn't wanted my plainness quantified by a stranger.

So, from that day, I'd stubbornly resisted the stipend while Pearl withdrew it weekly. Also, I doubted there was single Dinah left over at the end of the week.

"Miss. Pearl Rowntree," a banker by the name of Mr. Elliott came over to greet us, smiling warmly at my sister as he gave her a small bow. Then he turned to me. "Miss. Ivy Rowntree. As always, it is my pleasure to welcome you to our establishment. Are you both making a withdrawal today?" His gaze lingered on me.

"Of course," Pearl answered.

Mr. Elliott bowed, without waiting for my response, and motioned for us to follow him.

Our footsteps echoed as we walked between marble columns streaked with the colors from the ceiling dome, as though rainbows danced. Mr. Elliot ushered us into a cozy office, with plush carpets and two high-backed leather armchairs. Pearl was the first to sit, glaring at me until I lowered myself into the second seat.

"May I offer you a refreshment? Tea?" Mr. Elliott asked.

“That would be lovely,” Pearl answered. I pressed my lips into a smile to prevent myself from refusing his offer. My instinct was to get this over with as quickly as possible, while Pearl drew it out.

Tea was served in delicate porcelain cups painted with dragonflies. Steam curled up from the liquid, and I inhaled the pleasant, strong aroma.

“Shall we get down to business?” Mr. Elliott asked.

“Wonderful.” Pearl flashed the banker a smile. I took a mouthful of tea, scalded the roof of my mouth, then set the cup down with a clatter.

“Do you wish to start?” Mr. Elliott looked at Pearl. She glanced at me. I inclined my head.

Pearl rose from her seat, smoothed her dress, and went to stand on a small spot marked on the floor in the middle of the room. She batted her eyelids at Mr. Elliott as he slowly looked her over, starting with her face and following her figure down to her feet. His expression was impassive and studious, critically assessing her attributes, calculating a monetary figure based on the strengths and weaknesses of her presentation. When his eyes drifted back up to her face, he nodded. “Overall presentation is very nice—well put together. Your beauty is pleasing to the eye, and your presentation amplifies your natural attributes. I see no defects in style or substance. I am pleased to, once again, offer you the highest rate of stipend.”

Pearl flashed him a smile, bobbed a curtsy, then took her seat again.

“Thank you, Mr. Elliott.” She paused. “Have you raised the rate since I was last here?”

Mr. Elliott blinked. “No, Miss. Rowntree. The rate remains 500 Dinah. We will not raise it until we conduct a full review at the end of the year.”

Pearl pursed her lips. “Pity, it’s barely enough to cover expenses, you know. Beauty businesses continue to raise their rates. I think they’re trying to impoverish us.”

Mr. Elliott smiled politely. “I wish I could offer a larger amount. Truly, your beauty and composure deserve it. I may, on this occasion, be able to provide a one hundred Dinah bonus to your usual amount, since you have never presented in less than perfect condition.”

Pearl clapped her hands together. “Mr. Elliott, that is so kind. I’m pleased you

appreciate my efforts.”

“The pleasure is all mine, I assure you,” Mr. Elliott replied. Then he turned to me and

motioned toward the spot on the floor that Pearl had vacated.

I swallowed a lump in my throat, staying resolutely in my seat. Two spots burned on my cheeks.

“I would like to withdraw my wages today, Mr. Elliott,” I replied.

Next to me, Pearl sighed audibly. “Really, Ivy,” she started. I silenced her with a glare.

Mr. Elliott went to a cabinet and withdrew a file. He opened it, then perched a pair of reading glasses on his nose. “You work as an inspector and advisor to the President. An important job.” He barely glanced in my direction as he ran his eyes over my file. “250 Dinah.”

I bit my tongue to exclaim at the unfairness that a full-time job paid half the rate of the stipend paid to those who lead a beautiful existence—and mine was one of the better-paid jobs in the city. I opened my clutch and drew out a pocket watch that I’d recently finished making. It was a lovely example—not my best—but as good as any of the examples being sold by Melfall’s horologists. “I also have an item for sale. Will you appraise it?”

I handed Mr. Elliott the watch. He didn’t have the expertise to gauge its craftsmanship, but an aesthetic rating would increase the sale price.

“A lovely piece.” he examined the lid and chain carefully, before flicking open the case and examining the watch’s face. “Is it Guild-made?”

I bristled at the mention of the Unified Guild, an umbrella organization that united the Guilds into one voice, with more power than they’d had separately. I did not belong to, but kept my mouth shut as I shook my head.

“Pity. That lowers the price. Still, I rate it at a ninety-five on the aesthetic scale.” He returned the watch before closing the file. “Will that be all?”

I nodded.

“In that case, I shall escort you both to the teller to process your withdrawals.”



I stepped out of the First Forge Bank, my clutch weighed down with Dinah and breathed a sigh of relief.

“I hate that place.”

Pearl rolled her eyes. “You’re so stubborn. You work yourself to the bone for paltry wages when you could have Mr. Elliott examine your aesthetic worth and receive twice as much.”

Or not, I thought. “Maybe next time.”

Pearl opened her lace parasol to shelter her fair skin from the midday sunshine while I lifted my face to the sun for a moment, then adjusted my top hat. I glanced across the street, and something caught my eye.

Painted onto the wall of a shop next to an alley, was what appeared to be a small rabbit. A white rabbit.

“Do you see that?” I asked Pearl, then pointed. “Over there. A painted rabbit.”

Pearl glanced over. “Hmmm,” she murmured, but the contents of the shop window absorbed her attention. “What a ghastly dress! I hope you visit that shop. Their standards are too low for First Avenue.” Pearl put a hand on my arm. “I’m going to visit Mrs. Bancroft’s Parlor. She has such beautiful things. Will you come?”

Mrs. Bancroft’s was an invitation-only establishment where unusual and distinctive—and expensive—items were available for purchase. The two hundred, fifty Dinah weighed heavy in my clutch, but not heavy enough. I shook my head. I couldn’t afford such luxuries anyway, and I preferred to spend my time with the newspapers in the library.

Pearl gave me a look that suggested she guessed at what I planned to do with my afternoon. “Sometimes, I wonder if we’re really related. I really do.” She kissed me lightly on both cheeks, then set off toward Mrs. Bancroft’s Parlor.



Fewer people milled in the city center, compared to yesterday. Those that were out walked across the marketplace with their heads bowed, or resolutely looked in the opposite direction from the Pinnacle—as though determined not to see the working clock.

The faint ticking was like music, calling to me.

Once more, awed by the sheer size of the Pinnacle, I stared up, admiring the exposed workings of the clock. Despite seeming unfinished—the symmetrical form of the metal struts holding the enormous clock aloft were naked and unadorned—the clock tower had functional beauty. Even from this distance, I could see the large gears and joins as they rotated.

Today, several workmen dressed in bright yellow vests were standing on the balcony from which the late Queen had once addressed her subjects. They pointed at the clock and waved their arms as though engaged in animated discussion.

I raised a hand to my forehead to shield my eyes from the sun as I stared up. *If they can get to the balcony to see the inner workings of the clock, I can too.* I marched straight up to another yellow-vested man standing at the base of the ladder.

I acknowledged him with a nod and, with no hesitation, stepped around him to put a foot on the ladder.

“What are you doing, miss?” the man said, putting a hand out to stop me from climbing farther.

“The clock is working,” I replied. “I should like to see it.”

The man’s eyebrows drew together. “Why would a lovely young lady want to do that?”

“I like clocks.”

“This is no ordinary clock.”

“So I gathered,” I replied. “It hasn’t worked in some time.”

“Not since the fall of...” The man looked over his shoulder.

“Yes, I know,” I replied. “Since the Queen died.”

The workman started. “Lower your voice, miss. You never know who’s listening.”

“Thank you for the advice. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” I grabbed the next rung and pulled myself higher.

The workman reached out to stop me again, avoiding—but only just—physical restraint.

“I can’t let you, miss. It’s a long way up.”

“I have no fear of heights.”

“It’s just boring, dirty gears.”

I pursed my lips. “I want to see. I’m curious.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” the workman replied. “A young lady like you has got no cause to be curious.”

I gripped the rung of the ladder tighter. “I don’t see that it’s any of your concern what—”

“This area is closed,” the workman insisted. “we allow only authorized people up there.”

“Authorized by whom?”

“By the President.”

I smiled. “I see.” I took my foot from the ladder.

The workman’s expression softened with relief. “Wise choice, miss.”

“I’ll get authorization from the President if that’s what’s required.”

The man blinked. “You’ll do what?”

“You heard me.” I gathered my skirts and strode away from the man, leaving him open-mouthed in my wake.



Alice sat in her office behind a desk, obscured by piles of papers. Over several a fat, ginger cat, Young Dinah, purred while Alice scratched her ears. In the center of the room, a petitioner, dressed in formal coattails and clutching a hat in his hands, trembled as he spoke to the President.

“So Your Majesty—”

“Please, call me Madam President,” Alice interrupted him.

The petitioner went white. “S-s-sorry, Madam President. Force of h-h-habit.”

Alice inclined her head, though the slight sag of her shoulders was a sign of the weariness that Mother felt at the constant burden of leadership. Even eighteen years after the death of their previous monarch, the citizens of The Forge still feared the retribution of the Queen of Hearts.

“Please, continue,” Mother said. “You have concerns about vampires?”

“That’s right, Your... M-m-madam President. I work across from the Blood Bank on Fourth Street, you see—in a patisserie. I’m a baker. I bake

the finest danish in The Forge.” The petitioner paled. “I should have brought some for Your Maj... Madam President to sample. I’m s-s-sorry.”

“I’m sure the danish are excellent. What about the Blood Bank on Fourth Street?”

The petitioner fidgeted with his bowler hat. “Vampires go into the blood bank at night, when I’m just coming onto shift. I start work at 2am so that the pastries are ready for breakfast when people wake up, see? I often see vampires going into the blood bank. When they go in, they look angry—hungry, you know? When they come out, they look refreshed. Still pale, but glowing.” The petitioner shook his head. “Abnormal creatures.”

“That’s not unusual,” Alice replied, ignoring the petitioner’s last utterance. “The vampires go to the blood bank to feed, they come out well-fed. That’s why we set up the blood banks—so vampires can feed without endangering other citizens.”

“Yes, Your M... Madam President. But lately, the vampires have come out as angry as when they arrived. They look at me as though I was... food.”

Alice frowned. “Go on.”

He shuffled his feet. “They should investigate it,” he said. “I don’t want to be out at night with hungry vampires.”

Alice touched a finger to her temple, then noticed my presence at the back of the room. She waved a hand at me.

“Ivy, there might be an issue with low supply at the Blood Banks. Please investigate and bring me a report.”

The petitioner shuffled his feet again and gripped his hat so tightly that his knuckles went white. He glanced over his shoulder, then leaned forward and lowered his voice. “There’s something else. Rumors...”

Alice raised an eyebrow and waited. The petitioner cleared his throat.

“Rumors that... *she*... has returned. The white rabbit is gathering her supporters.”

I stared at the man, my mouth dropping open. *The white rabbit?*

Alice pressed her lips into a straight line. “Does this have anything to do with the Pinnacle clock?”

The petitioner nodded, eyes widening. “It’s another sign.”

“The Queen is dead,” Alice said in a firm voice. “She has not returned. The white rabbit is not gathering her supporters.”

“But—”

Alice raised a hand to stop the man from speaking further. "If the white rabbit were here, I would know."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The petitioner bowed deeply. Alice sighed, waving a hand at her assistant, Jack Chambers, who quickly escorted the man out of her office.

"Shall I bring in the next petitioner?" Jack asked once he'd closed the door behind the man.

Alice shook her head. "I need a moment."

Jack nodded, quietly excusing himself from the room.

"You look tired, Mother," I said. Alice leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes. Wisps of gray streaked her blonde hair, now tied back in a bun, and fine lines marked the edges of her eyes. Her normally rosy cheeks were pale.

Alice reached out to take my hand, giving me a brief half-smile. "I'm sure it's nothing. People need something to complain about."

"Of course, Mother," I replied. "Shall I also look into the rumor about the white rabbit?"

Alice waved a hand dismissively, though her mouth turned down at the edges. "The Queen is dead. The white rabbit left The Forge long ago." I remembered the painting I'd seen on the wall and was about to tell her about it when she patted my hand.

"You're a comfort to me, Ivy," Alice said. "I'm so thankful to have a daughter who helps me shoulder this burden."

"I'm happy to do it, Mother," I murmured. "Actually, there's something else I wanted to speak to you about."

Alice shifted in her chair, suddenly tense, and took her hand from mine. "I don't really have time just now. There's a queue of petitioners outside. I don't see how I shall see them all today."

I didn't protest and was about to excuse myself when Alice reached out to grab my arm. "You will follow up on stocks at the Blood Banks, won't you?"

My dream of being bitten by a vampire came vividly to mind. I bit my lip.

"Please—I don't need a problem with the vampires right now. A report will assure the baker that there is nothing to fear, and his complaint about vampires will go away. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

My heart beat a little faster, but I discreetly wiped the palms of my hands on the fabric of my skirts. “You can rely on me.”

Alice patted my cheek. “Thank you, dear.”

At that moment, the door swung open, and Jack strode in, holding a red rose between two fingers.

“For you, Madam President,” he said, but he didn’t give the rose to Alice. He stared at it with a horrified look.

“An admirer?” I raised an eyebrow, a half-smile touching my lips. Alice had never had a special man in her life, but she was still beautiful.

“The Queen sent a red rose to those she planned to execute,” Jack whispered. “Do you think...”

The smile fell from my lips as I turned to Alice. She fixed her blue eyes on the rose and was white as a sheet.

“Shall I burn it?” Jack asked.

“Mother?”

Alice shuddered, then straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath. “The Queen is dead,” Alice said, firmly, and forced a smile. “Put the rose in a vase. As Ivy said, perhaps, I have a secret admirer.” Alice gave me a wink, and the tension in her posture fell away. “It’s about time.”

14 AUGUST



I paused outside the shop window to *Bertha's Bag Emporium* on Fourth Avenue, which boasted over a hundred different handbags in all colors, shapes, and sizes. Displayed in the window were three examples of the handiwork contained inside. I ran my hands over my clothes and glanced at my reflection.

A person could not claim to be an aesthetic inspector without being properly turned out. I tucked a stray curl under my hat, pinned my official badge to the lapel of my coat, and slid on white gloves. Then I pulled out my *List of Aesthetic Indicators*, the official checklist.

I didn't really need it—the list was just for show. Since my eighteenth birthday, when I started working as an inspector, I had memorized the checklist. I wiped a finger over the store window and held it up.

A light brown smudge colored the tip of my glove. An acceptable level of dust after a hot summer, I decided. I made a note on the list. I stepped back and ran my eyes over the window display. Pleasing, though unimaginative. The colors of the bags did not clash, but the placement was not symmetrical and gave a sensation of lopsidedness.

I made another note on my checklist.

I tucked the list under my arm and pushed on the shop door.

The woman standing behind the counter stared at me, then quickly ducked out the back. A moment later, a small, shapeless woman, dressed in black, hurried out. A set of glasses were perched on her nose, and her white hair was tied back in a severe bun.

"Welcome, Inspector," she said as she hurried towards me. "I am Miss Bertha, the owner. May I ask..." Bertha hesitated briefly. "Has there been a

complaint?”

“Inspector Rowntree,” I said, pulling at the fingers of the glove on my right hand to take it off as I reached out to greet her properly. “Just a routine inspection.”

Bertha was visibly relieved, though her eyes darted around, checking that everything was in place. “May I offer you tea, Inspector Rowntree?”

I shook my head. Although offers of refreshments, samples, and gifts were frequent, I rarely accepted. It was too difficult to judge an establishment according to code after accepting such niceties. “I won’t be long, Miss. Bertha.”

The skin around Bertha’s eyes tightened, but she nodded. “Let me know if you need help.”

I ran my eyes over the displays, first considering the layout and look of the shop as a whole. It was orderly, without mess, but there was a fussy, cluttered atmosphere—too many items on display.

I turned my attention to the smaller details, ambling over to the nearest shelf, and noting the positions of the display cases and their contents. Another dusty smudge dirtied my gloves. I frowned, making another mark on my checklist.

I picked up one of the handbags, studying it carefully. The stitching was fine, and the leather was of good quality. The inner lining was well sewn and fit. There were no scuffs on the item, and the color was rich and consistent.

“Is everything all right, Inspector?” Bertha hovered at my shoulder.

I put the handbag down. “A high-quality item,” I replied, as I wrote the fact down on the list. “I won’t be much longer.”

“Miss. Bertha?”

The woman hovered at the door leading into the back room. As she called out, I glimpsed her.

She had a defect of the left eye—it didn’t follow the right one, but gazed off in a different direction, making it appear she was looking past me.

Miss. Bertha shooed the assistant away but caught my expression. “The poor girl just works in the back. Customers don’t see her. It’s charity, really. I keep her on because her parents can’t work just now.”

“She was in the front when I came in,” I said.

“She rarely works in the front.” Miss. Bertha wrung her hands, frowning. She looked over her shoulder, then leaned toward me. “Don’t

shut me down. Not for a bit of mercy. Please, Inspector.”

I looked at my checklist. A mixed report. “There is some dust on your display cases, and the general layout of your shop is too fussy. However, the quality of your goods is high, so I’m willing to overlook those things.” I paused, my eyes drawn to the place where the assistant stood a moment ago.

“Inspector Rowntree, I’d be thrilled to make you a gift. I’ll wrap it up nicely.” Bertha moved to take the handbag I’d inspected out of the display case.

I held up a hand to stop her. “That won’t be necessary. I warn you—keep your assistant out of sight. I’ll return in one month to ensure that you have rectified the cleanliness and improved the display. If these things are attended to, I’ll give you a passing report.”

Miss. Bertha clasped her hands to her chest and dipped a quick curtsy. “Thank you, Inspector. I am most grateful.”

I scribbled the note on my checklist, omitting the assistant. As I handed Miss. Bertha a copy of her receipt, I noticed a small business card on the floor, as though someone had dropped it.

There was no writing—only the image of a white rabbit on a black background.

Just like the one painted outside the First Forge Bank.

Miss. Bertha cleared her throat. “Is there something else? Are you sure you wouldn’t like that handbag? I am happy to wrap it—”

The shop owner’s words drew my attention back to my immediate work. “No, thank you. Remember, I’ll return in one month. I shall expect improvement.”



The door of the Fourth Avenue Blood Bank swung closed behind me, and I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the relative darkness. I had never entered one of the city’s blood banks before—I’d never wanted to donate blood, nor experienced any dire need for additional income—so the number of people in the waiting room surprised me.

A chill ran down the length of my spine as I remembered my dream—the sharp fangs sinking into my throat. I froze in the doorway, overcome by

a sudden fear of coming face-to-face with thirsty vampires. As I stood there, someone tried to come in, and the door hit me in the back. I stumbled forward, and my throat bobbed as I turned, frightened of who might be behind me.

The man who entered was no vampire. He was ruddy-faced and short of breath, with pock scars on his face.

“Why are you standing in the doorway?” he grumbled, barely glancing at me as he pushed past and approached the reception desk that I hadn’t yet seen. He grabbed a number and went to sit on one of the few empty chairs.

I straightened my vest and hat, pulling myself together, before approaching the desk. I glanced around the waiting room, searching for vampires but saw none. The people seated in the waiting room weren’t the usual crowd that frequented the establishments of Melfall. Their clothes were unfashionable, too worn, and they were all too short, too dumpy, or too odd-looking to be considered beautiful. Some of them were too unusual even to be considered plain.

“Are you waiting for an invitation?” the receptionist crossed her arms and raised one eyebrow as she watched me. A blush rose to my cheeks before I squared my shoulders and marched over, putting my clipboard down on the desk with more force than was necessary.

“I’m here to inspect your premises,” I said, noticing her name badge read Audrey. I flashed my badge at her.

Audrey’s demeanor changed instantly. Her eyes widened, and her arms fell away from her chest. She fiddled with the papers on her desk with one hand, while the other smoothed the stray hairs from her face.

“I’m sorry, Inspector. I didn’t see you properly.”

I turned toward the waiting area. “I must see each of your public spaces. Would someone show me around?”

Audrey tapped her fingers on the desk. “I have to stay here.”

“Anyone else?”

“Err...” she looked across the waiting room. A door swung open, and a woman in a white coat stepped out, splattered with droplets of blood.

“Number 24?” The woman called out, casting a bored gaze around the waiting room.

A man jumped up, waving a ticket.

Audrey hurried over, “Miss. Crispin,” she called.

“I’m next,” the man insisted, pushing his ticket in Miss. Crispin’s face.

“Sit down,” Audrey snapped at the man. “This is—”

“I’m next,” he insisted. “I’ve been waiting. She just got here.” He jabbed a finger at me.

“You can’t jump ahead,” Miss. Crispin insisted, barely glancing at me. “Take a ticket and wait.”

The man smiled. “Exactly. I’m next.”

“Now, hold on,” Audrey said. “This is *Inspector* Rowntree.”

“Who cares?” the man said, but Miss. Crispin’s eyes widened as she shot a look at Audrey.

“An inspector? Here?” Miss. Crispin asked.

“As you see,” Audrey replied, a smug note to her voice

“I’ve come to inspect the premises. Will you give me a tour?” I asked.

Miss. Crispin paused, then pushed the door open with one hand. Before I stepped through it, another woman came out with a bandage around her elbow.

She saw Audrey. “I want my Dinah,” she said, without a word of greeting.

Audrey huffed. “Come with me,” she strode back to the desk and dropped several coins into the woman’s outstretched hand.

“Inspector Rowntree? Please?” Miss. Crispin led the way through the doorway into a long hallway.

I took out my checklist as I followed Miss. Crispin. “Is there another entrance?” I asked. “For vampires?”

Miss. Crispin frowned. “I beg your pardon?”

I motioned a hand toward the now closed door. “There aren’t any vampires in the waiting room. Do you segregate those people giving blood from those... err, receiving it?”

Miss. Crispin arched an eyebrow. “You must ask Miss Dixon.”

I pursed my lips, then pointed to the spatters of blood on her front. “Don’t you have spare coats, in case of spills?”

Miss. Crispin looked down, then crossed her arms over her chest, attempting—unsuccessfully—to cover up the stains. I made a mark on my list. Her eyes darted across the page as though to read it, but I quickly covered it up with one hand.

“This a public hallway?” I raised my eyebrows as I used one gloved finger to slide across the length of a side table. My fingertip came away

brown with dust. I looked around the hallway critically, taking my time, while Miss. Crispin fidgeted. "Please, show me your deposit rooms."

Miss. Crispin opened a door leading off from the hallway. The small room was empty, except for a lamp that cast a dim light over a table and a single chair. The table was dented and scratched. A dribble of blood was visible on the table leg.

"This is a working blood bank, Inspector Rowntree—an operational room, not a sitting room," Miss. Crispin said. I glanced at her, surprised by the sharpness of her tone. "I hope you'll take that into consideration in your report."

"I take all factors into consideration," I replied, meeting her stare with one of my own.

Miss. Crispin crossed her arms over her chest again, hesitating a moment before she spoke. "While it's not my place to tell you about the operation of the blood bank, I know that there is only one entrance. It's too early for vampires to be out. The sunlight," she added.

Of course.

"I appreciate your cooperation." I smiled and stepped closer to her, as though sharing a secret. "Tell me—and this is *not* for my report—have you had a sufficient supply recently? Is there enough blood to match demand?"

"You saw the crowd in the waiting room," Miss Crispin replied. "It's always like that. Selling blood is easy Dinah. For these people, it's their main source of revenue. We have a lot of regulars."

"Do you ever turn business away?"

"We value blood donations, Inspector."

I smiled. "Of course. I meant, do you run out of stock? Do you turn away the, err, buyers?"

Miss. Crispin shook her head. "Of course not. We have stockpiles—shall I show you?"

She led me down a set of stairs into a large, cool basement, where wooden crates were stacked to the ceiling. I removed the lid of the nearest one—it was full of packets of blood, preserved on ice.

"These are all the same?" I motioned to the rest of the crates. Miss. Crispin nodded.

"You never run out of blood?" I asked. Miss. Crispin shook her head. "Have you had much business recently? From buyers?"

Miss. Crispin's eyes darted back up the stairs. "About usual."

“Any dissatisfaction about the product? From the vampires?”

This time, Miss. Crispin frowned. “Dissatisfaction? I shouldn’t think so. Blood is blood. I’ve never heard... No,” she replied firmly. Then she caught my eye. “Have you heard different?”

“I cannot disclose such things,” I said, but I gave my head a little shake for her benefit. She appeared relieved. Still, her answers gave me pause. The baker had sworn to seeing hungry vampires coming out of this blood bank, but there were plenty of people here donating blood. Perhaps he’d been mistaken? Nothing here appeared unusual.

“Would you like to see the other rooms?”

I shook my head, then remembered the other rumors the baker had mentioned. “Have you heard anything about a white rabbit?”

Miss Crispin raised both eyebrows in astonishment. She didn’t need to answer my question—I knew the look on her face was genuine. I took my checklist, and for her benefit, I screwed it into a ball. “Thank you, Miss. Crispin. Would you mind showing me out?”



When I entered the Emporium, Chesh was showing one of his favorite items to a young lady and her fiancée. I paused in the doorway, watching Chesh’s eyes light up as he draped the necklace around the young lady’s neck, then pressed a button.

The necklace lit up, and the jewels reflected the interior light so that it bounced all over the store. The young lady gasped. Her fiancée gave an exclamation of surprise, then leaned closer to examine it.

“I must have it,” the lady said, batting her eyelids demurely. “I’ll be the talk of the city if I turn up to our engagement party wearing this necklace.”

“There is just one *tiny* issue,” Chesh admitted. “The necklace needs an electrical current to run the light, I’m afraid. It’s not very portable.”

“Does that mean I won’t be able to dance?” the young lady asked.

“If I’m excused from a dozen dances, it’d be worth the price,” her fiancée joked.

The young woman shot him a glare. Then her mouth formed an O, and she fanned herself, hopping up and down on one foot. “Get it off, get it off!”

Chesh banged a fist on the button, and the light immediately disappeared. “It gets hot, too...” he admitted as he ripped the necklace from her.

The couple strode out of the shop without a backward glance, as the young lady rubbed at her décolletage.

Chesh sighed as he set the necklace back in its cabinet. He shrugged when he saw me. “I’ll find the right buyer one day.”

“Hopefully, one who is impervious to burns,” I replied, “until you stop it overheating.”

Chesh wagged a finger at me. “It’ll work. Then every woman will line up to buy one.” He reached for my hand and pressed a kiss to my knuckles, then winked. “Don’t rush off, I’ve other things to show you.”

“An automatic hairbrush?” I remembered the device he’d demonstrated a week before—it had started well, but one brush slipped out of alignment, leaving the mannequin’s hair in a dreadful tangle. “Or perhaps a mechanized nose clipper? Or the machine for tying bootlaces?” I struggled to keep the smile from my face as I thought about other demonstrations of Chesh’s inventions that hadn’t worked.

“Laugh all you like—one day, my inventions will be famous. Everyone will want one. They’ll admit me to the Guild, for sure.”

I laughed, nodding my head. Even though I mocked my friend, I knew he was talented, creative, and determined. I really believed he would invent something that people would line up outside his shop to buy. He just hadn’t managed it yet.

Chesh put a hand on my elbow and led me toward the back of the shop. “I’ve been working on something new. Something amazing.”

“I’ve heard that before,” I said, flashing him a smile.

Chesh smiled back, unfazed. “This time,” he winked. He crouched next to a strange-looking machine. It stood almost as tall as me, with a metal plate on the floor, big enough for a person to stand on, with a pole sticking up from it, and handlebars at about my shoulder height. He put on a pair of goggles. “Allow me to demonstrate,” he said and flicked a switch.

The machine whirred into life, rattling, shaking, and hissing. It rocked as a gust of air shot out of the bottom of the plate. The hissing and humming were so loud, it blocked out all other sound. I had to stop myself from putting my hands over my ears.

Chesh grinned up at me from where he crouched next to the machine, his eyes large beneath the goggles that obscured half his face.

“See? It lifts off the ground—it’s flying!” he yelled above the noise. I crouched down to see underneath. Sure enough, the machine was hovering about half a handspan in the air. Now launched, it seemed slightly more stable, with less rocking and rattling.

“What’s it for?” I asked.

Chesh wiggled his eyebrows as he stood, taking the handle of the machine with both hands. “Watch.”

He put one foot on the metal plate, pressing down and testing his weight.

“Be careful,” I warned.

Chesh rolled his eyes. He pushed off the ground and put all his weight onto the metal plate.

I held my breath. A moment passed, and Chesh’s smile widened. “I’m flying!” He punched one fist into the air.

The *hum* of the engine became a whine, then a loud *bang* ricocheted through the shop, and a cloud of black smoke billowed from under the footplate. I put a hand over my mouth and nose as the machine lurched sideways to throw Chesh to the floor. He landed, hard, while the machine skittered across the room to crash into his tool bench.

Chesh groaned, ripping off his goggles as he sat up and stared reproachfully at the machine.

“Maybe the next one will be a winner,” I said, offering him a hand to help him to his feet.

Chesh ran a hand through his hair. “All it needs are a few minor adjustments.”

I looked doubtfully at the parts bent by the impact. “Want me to have a look?”

Though my specialty, and my interest, ran to clockwork, I had a knack for anything with moving parts. They *made sense* to me. I seemed to be able to look at a machine and know what was wrong with it, or what small adjustment would make it work properly. I could never describe exactly how I understood machines, but I did.

Chesh gave me a glare. “And have you and your magical talents claiming all the credit? No, thank you.”

“It’s nothing to do with magic,” I retorted. “It’s just—”

“A *knack*,” Chesh finished my sentence for me. “I know. You and machines just understand each other. Honestly, Ivy, if you devoted as much attention to the people in your life as you do to your clocks, you might understand them a little more. You might even have some friends.”

I blushed and turned away from Chesh so he wouldn’t see the red in my cheeks. He was right, though. Machines were logical. They made sense. People did not. Not to me, anyway. “I have friends,” I protested. “You. Pearl.”

Chesh chuckled and grabbed his coat and hat. “I think it’s about time for a visit to *The Tea Party*, don’t you?” he asked, as he slid his coat over his shoulders. “I hear it’s got something fun happening tonight. Plus, it has the best cocktails in town.”

I picked up my top hat. “How can I say no to that?”



Chesh stopped underneath a sign that read: *The Tea Party*. As the door swung open, I heard muffled conversations, laughter, the clinking of glasses, a shuffling of feet, and the scrape of chairs on the wooden floor. A bell rang.

“New partners!”

A deep voice rang out over the noise. As I stepped through the doorway, everyone in the room stood up and moved one place to their left before taking a seat again. As a result, they all sat with a new partner. Glasses clinked again as the new partners greeted each other.

Waiters in white waistcoats rushed around with teapots, pouring liquid into teacups that ran low.

Chesh leaned over to me. “*The Tea Party* hosts the greatest tea parties. There’s no telling when it will start or stop—the last one went for fifteen hours straight—but everyone’s invited!”

I watched a waiter pouring a pink liquid into a teacup. “What sort of tea is that?”

“Not tea at all,” Chesh replied. “What would be the fun in that?” Chesh lifted a hand to get the attention of the barman. The barman nodded, clicked his fingers once, and a waiter hurried over to place two chairs at the end of the long table.

“Dirty flamingo,” Chesh said, ordering my favorite cocktail as he held up two fingers. He pulled out the nearest chair for me to sit down.

The pink liquid had barely hit my cup when the bell sounded again.

“New partners!”

The person next to me hauled me to my feet and moved into my chair.

Chesh moved in the other direction. “See you next time!” he winked, then found himself seated in front of a blonde beauty. He leaned over to kiss her hand, then raised his glass in a toast—no doubt, to her beauty—as he gave her his full attention. Chesh had an eye for beautiful ladies, and they for him. He would probably break a few hearts tonight. Chesh understood people. He knew what to say. He charmed everyone. I could never understand how he made instant friends with almost everyone he met.

I was tense in my seat, gripping my teacup of dirty flamingo. An older gentleman with a red nose sat in front of me. He raised his cup to me, then tipped it back and drained it, holding up a hand until the waiter hurried over to refill it. I searched around for something to say, but my mind remained blank. I took a gulp of my drink.

“How long have you been here, then?” he said, slurring his words slightly.

“I’ve just arrived,” I replied, relishing the first mouthful of the fiery liquid as it tore down my throat.

“A newcomer!” His eyes lit up in delight, and he held out his hand to shake mine. “I’m Mr. Bellacott. I’ve been here for...,” he fumbled with his pocket watch, squinting at it. “Eight hours and thirteen minutes. Splendid. I’m determined to break the record. So many fall over, you know, but I won’t be one of them.” He pointed at the side of the room, where I saw several people passed out on benches.

“Are they all right?”

Mr. Bellacott waved a hand in dismissal. “They will be once they’ve had a nap. They won’t claim the title, though. This tea party goes on only as long as one initial member remains. It’s between me and that fellow over there.” Mr. Bellacott pointed to a tall man with a long face. “Once both of us fall over, or leave, the party’s finished. The last one standing has naming rights for the event—and the honor of it, if the party breaks a record. *Bellacott’s Biggest Tea Party* has a nice ring to it, don’t you think? Only... —Mr. Bellacott consulted his watch again—“err, five..., no six hours and forty... forty-seven minutes to go!” He snapped his pocket watch closed

and tucked it into the pocket of his vest, just as the barman rang the bell again.

I found myself hoisted to my feet by the person to my right. I turned to glare at him as I sat down opposite a young woman with black, curly hair. I lifted my glass.

“Got your eye on anyone?” she asked, leaning forward as she looked along the table.

I shook my head. “I’ve only just arrived,” I replied, as I glanced over to see Chesh seated opposite a busty brunette who was laughing at one of his jokes.

“I have,” she stared longingly at the other end of the table, “but he’s gone past. It’ll be ages until I sit with him again.” She sighed.

I sipped my dirty flamingo as I searched around for another topic of conversation. A thought popped into my head and I blurted it out without thinking: “Have you ever met any vampires?”

Her eyebrows shot up as she spat out a mouthful of liquid. “Certainly not. Why would you ask such a thing?”

“Just curious,” I said, taking another sip “No vampires here tonight, then?”

She looked around, suddenly alarmed. “I haven’t seen any. Do vampires often frequent this bar?”

I shrugged. “Not in particular, but they’re creatures of the night.”

The woman pursed her lips, shooting a worried glance over her shoulder, as though a vampire might be looming there.

The bell rang before I had to make any further conversation.

As the tea party progressed, I sat across from three more gentlemen and a lady, before finding the place opposite me empty.

Instead, a tall glass of dirty flamingo—exactly the way I like to drink it—sat in front of me. A small card was tucked underneath. In elegant handwriting, the card said: *We choose our future.*

On the back of the card, there was a motif of a white rabbit. The same motif that I’d seen before. My mouth went dry. I waved a hand at the closest waiter.

“Who left this?” I asked, pointing at the glass.

The waiter blinked. “I’m sorry, Miss.?”

I repeated my question, but the waiter shook his head, pleading ignorance. “You might lose your place on the table,” he warned me, as I

stood up.

I shrugged, picking up my glass, and moved towards the barman with his hand on the bell.

“Excuse me?” I raised my voice to be heard over the din.

The barman raising one eyebrow at me. “A problem with your drink?”

I shook my head. “Someone left it for me, but I didn’t see who. There was just an empty chair and a card underneath it.”

The barman glanced at me briefly before ringing the bell. Everyone stood and moved along one place, before chinking glasses and starting new conversations.

“Did you see who left it?” I asked the barman.

“I might have,” he replied. A waiter appeared at my elbow, putting an empty teapot on the bar. The barman handed a full one to the waiter who hurried away again. “I don’t suppose it matters if I tell you—he didn’t swear me to secrecy.”

“Who didn’t?”

“Raven.”

I blinked. “Raven?”

“You heard me.”

“Is Raven associated with the white rabbit?”

The bartender started rubbing at a glass with a towel. He shrugged. “I don’t know about any white rabbits.”

I paused, staring at the card. “Raven is an unusual name,” I ventured.

“It’s no human name, that’s for sure. If you don’t know who Raven is, then I can’t help you.”

I stared down at the card. The bartender was right—Raven wasn’t a human name. That meant only one thing: Raven was a vampire.

Not only that, but Raven knew who I was. The knowledge sent a shiver down my spine.

15 AUGUST



Candlelight flickered from hundreds of candles set into elaborate candelabras all around the dark room. The shadows danced, illuminating hats on every surface. So many hats—tall, small, round, square, decorated with ribbons, bows, feathers, bones, gears and cogs—sitting on every available surface.

Despite the rainbow of color they provided, I barely looked at the hats. Instead, I stared at the figure standing in front of me. An impossibly beautiful face—smooth, pale skin like porcelain, black hair that fell to his strong jaw, with piercing green eyes that sparkled like gemstones, watching me.

I couldn't take my eyes from his face, as though an invisible cord snapped tight between us, drawing us together. A regular thudding pulsed in my ears. My heartbeat drowning out every other sound.

I felt hot—too hot—and I fluttered my fan with one hand, as I reached out to touch his face with the other. My fingers ran over the skin of his cheek, and a shiver ran through me at the cool touch of his skin.

He caught my hand and pressed a kiss into my palm. Then lowered his face to smell my wrist. I held my breath. He continued up my arm to my elbow, then up my inner arm with a feathery touch so light that it tickled.

His wide, red lips stretched into a smile as he looked up at me through long black lashes. He continued to inhale my scent, moving along my collarbone.

He closed his eyes, as he stopped at the soft skin at the base of my neck. When his eyes flickered open, the pupils were so dilated that his eyes looked black.

“May I?” he asked, and his voice was a low hum, like music. I wanted to hear more. I froze, my eyes locked on his face, my body attuned to his movement, mesmerized by the entrancing sound of his voice.

I nodded once.

Then he opened his mouth wide, and I saw the glint of candlelight on his fangs.

My pulse thudded in my ears like thunder, but I couldn’t move.

The vampire bent his head to the base of my neck and his razor-sharp teeth sank into my skin.

I opened my mouth to scream.



I sat straight upright, as my heart pounded. I drew my knees to my chest as I clutched at the spot where I thought I’d been bitten. I stared around frantically for the vampire to catch him in the act of escape.

A sliver of light crept in through a crack in the heavy curtains of my bedroom windows. It lit the room enough to banish the shadows. There wasn’t anyone else here.

No vampire.

No one.

I looked at my hand, turning it over. No blood, no cuts. No blemishes of any kind.

I exhaled deeply and let my forehead fall to my knees.

A nightmare—the same one I’d been having for days.

I’m thinking too much about vampires because of the investigation into the blood banks.

But no—the dreams about vampires started before my investigation. Besides, I wasn’t dreaming about vampires. I was dreaming about one vampire. One impossibly handsome vampire with intoxicating eyes.

I threw back the remaining covers, reaching for my pocket watch. My fingers brushed the metal case, and I saw the elegant script written on the card left for me at The Tea Party: *We choose our future.*

What did it mean? Another puzzle.

I pushed those thoughts aside, flicked open the watch, and gasped. I swung my legs over the side of the four-poster bed, slid into some slippers

and shuffled over to my wardrobe to dress.

A maid had left a tray of breakfast on the side table. I nibbled on a slice of bread as I read a note, then groaned. Mother had called for me, and I was already late.



“You wanted to see me, Mother?”

Alice was at her desk, reading a stack of papers. The smudges underneath her eyes suggested she had slept little.

Alice’s face lightened as she saw me. “Ivy...” She paused as she studied me. “You look as though you’ve barely slept.”

I cleared my throat. “I was out late with Chesh, then I had nightmares.”

Alice pressed her lips together, in an attempt at disapproval, but I could see in the way her lips curled up at the edges, that she wasn’t angry. “How is Mr. Cheshire? I haven’t seen him lately.” Alice raised one eyebrow.

“He’s been busy at the Emporium. He’s inventing a flying machine.”

Alice laughed, and the sound lifted my mood. She didn’t laugh much anymore—always too busy for fun. “If he’s going to keep you out at all hours, he should do the proper thing and ask my permission for your hand.”

“Mother!” My eyes widened as I shook my head. “Chesh is a friend. Nothing more.”

“So you say,” Alice remarked dryly. “I’ve not heard Mr. Cheshire’s side of the story.”

“There is only one side of this story, Mother,” I replied, then cast around to change the subject. “Have you had any breakfast? Shall I ring for tea?”

The smile faded as Alice looked down at the stack of papers. “I don’t have time. Actually, there was a reason... I wrote it down... somewhere...”

“While you’re looking, I wanted to ask you—” I started.

Alice placed both hands flat on the desk. “Did you find out anything about the blood banks?” she interrupted.

I nodded. “I visited the blood bank yesterday. There was a crowd waiting to donate blood. They have plenty of stock.”

“No substance to the petitioner’s fears? Good,” Alice replied. “I don’t need a vampire problem. That clock is making everyone crazy. People are

terrified the Queen of Hearts is returning. They're refusing to leave their houses."

"Why do you think it started ticking again?" I asked.

Alice looked up again from her papers. "You're not worried, too? You're too sensible for that."

I shook my head. "It makes me wonder, though... Why does a clock start to tick after all this time?"

"I'm less concerned about the clock than about people refusing to leave their houses. We have several staff who didn't turn up to work today. I heard reports of people packing their possessions into a cart and leaving the city—they're willing to take their chances in a strange place because a clock is ticking. Honestly, sometimes I do not understand people at all."

Me, neither, I thought.

I slipped the card out of my pocket and turned it over so that the white rabbit motif faced upwards.

I cleared my throat. "There was something else—"

"That reminds me," Alice jabbed her finger in the air, her eyes lighting up. "Will you work an extra shift today? In the Spades Quarter? One inspector didn't show up for work."

I nodded. "I've never been there, but I know where it is." The oldest part of the city, the Spades Quarter was otherwise known as the vampire quarter, because of the large concentration of vampire residences.

Alice nodded. "Be careful and don't linger after dark, do you hear?"

She called out to Jack and requested the specifics of the inspection schedule. As he hurried out of the room to oblige, Alice waved a hand at me. "See you at dinner."

Ignoring her dismissal, I asked, "Mother, what do you know about the white rabbit?"

Alice froze. "What?"

"The white rabbit," I repeated. "The baker mentioned him the other day."

Alice fussed with the papers on her desk, not meeting my eyes. "I remember." She cleared her throat. "He served the late Queen. He was always late. Or, he was always worried about being late. The Queen of Hearts brought out everyone's neuroses."

"What happened to him?"

Two red dots appeared on Alice's cheeks, a sign that she was embarrassed. She looked out of the window. There was a long pause. "He left The Forge," she said, finally. "I have no idea where he went."

"Do you recognize this?" I held out the card with the white rabbit motif. Alice looked at it, but there was no flicker of recognition. She passed back the card.

"Was the white rabbit a vampire?"

"No!" Alice looked astonished. "Why all these questions?"

I turned the card around in my hand, unable to put my thoughts into words. The petitioner had mentioned rumors about the white rabbit gathering the late Queen's supporters, and I'd seen the painting of the white rabbit in several places across the city. Whether it had anything to do with the white rabbit that Alice used to know, I had no idea. But I was sure it was connected to Raven, the vampire.

I hated a puzzle I couldn't solve.

"No reason, Mother," I murmured. "I'll get to work and let you get back to yours."



"You'll ruin me!"

Mr. Thackery clasped his hands in front of him as he dropped to his knees. He was balding, and his remaining gray hair floated around his head, somewhere between short and long. His coat was worn, his collar yellow with wear. His own appearance broke the aesthetic code, let alone the condition of his shop. *Thackery's Fine Antiques* looked as though it hadn't been cleaned since its goods were first made.

"My records show this is the third time an inspector has assessed code violations," I said, taking another step backward to put space between myself and Mr. Thackery. "You cannot continue to operate in violation of the code."

"If I can't open my shop, I can't run my business, I can't feed my children," Mr. Thackery said, reaching out to grab my skirts and holding me in place.

I pulled at my dress to whip my skirts from his grasp. "If you remedy the violations and pay the fine, we will return your license. It's detailed in

this list.” I held out a piece of paper to Mr. Thackery. “Please, get up.”

He slowly got to his feet, then snatched the paper from my hand. He ran his eyes over the list of violations, and his shoulders slumped.

“I can’t pay for this—I can’t even afford the repairs, let alone the fine to get my license back. You’re putting me out of business.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Thackery. I can’t do any more for you. I detail everything in that list. I wish you the best of luck.” I cleared my throat. “Good day.”

Without waiting for Mr. Thackery’s response, I pushed through the door and stepped onto the street, taking a deep breath to rid myself of the musty odor that permeated the antique shop. As I stepped away, I made the mistake of looking back and saw Mr. Thackery, sobbing into his handkerchief. My throat seized up. I spun around to look in the other direction.

He’d had his chances, I told myself. The previous inspector warned him. He broke the rules.

I didn’t feel any better.

I kept my eyes forward as I walked away. When I’d put a block between myself and the antique shop, I looked down at the last item on my list.

Ace of Spades Apothecary. I marched towards it, determined to get the inspection over with. After the day I’d had, I wasn’t surprised the regular inspector had stayed home—almost every business I’d visited, had required a warning for a code violation, and I’d had to issue two shut down notices. I’d already decided to tell Alice that she would need to find someone else to take on the regular rounds.

The apothecary was dark. The sign in the window read: *Closed.*

Below, a handwritten note read: *Open 8pm until 8am.*

I flicked open the case of my pocket watch. Almost two hours until the shop would open. Alice had insisted that I not remain in this quarter after dark, but the summer evenings were still long. I should have time to inspect the shop and get home before dark, but I would cut it close.

I turned in a circle and saw the *Reading Leaves Tearooms*, where I could pass the time. I settled myself at the window and raised my hand to draw the attention of a server.



I was waiting out in front of the apothecary when the sign flipped to *Open*. A young man fiddled with the lock, then pulled open door. His eyes widened when he saw me, but he stood aside to let me enter.

I felt no inclination towards small talk. “Inspector Rowntree. Just a routine inspection.”

The young man returned to his place behind the desk where he busied himself with what appeared to be accounts. I wandered between rows and rows of vials of colored liquids with fancy descriptions I had never heard of. Though, with labels like *Clorisazole: For use around the eyes to eliminate crow’s feet* or *Nobaldogene Perminisec: One spoonful to be taken at bedtime to ward off baldness*, I expected his custom was good among those who could pay for remedies to increase their aesthetic credit.

Running my gloved fingers over the shelves and vials, I found only hints of dust. The apothecary was clean, well ordered, though perhaps more cluttered than was seemly. I was halfway through my checklist when the bell tinkled as the shop door opened.

The timber floorboards creaked to announce the first customer. I didn’t look up, but I continued to work my way down the checklist, moving through the shop, while a conversation with the customer continued in the background.

It wasn’t until the bell tinkled again that the salutation pierced my concentration.

“Good evening, Raven. Until next time.”

My head jerked up, and I dropped the clipboard I was holding. *Raven?*

The door closed with a *thud*. I spun to face it, but there was no sign of the customer who had been in the shop only moments ago.

Had I heard right? Could it be *my* Raven? How many could there be in Melfall? It had to be the same man who had left me his card at *The Tea Party*.

Leaving the clipboard on the floor, and my hat on the counter, I ran to the door and jerked it open. Dimly, the shop assistant called out in surprise, but I ignored him as I stepped onto the street. Looking left and right, I berated myself for not getting a better look at the customer when he’d entered the apothecary.

The streets were dark and empty. I cursed my luck as I looked at the sky. It had become a deep indigo as the last glimmer of light disappeared.

I'd promised Alice that I wouldn't linger after nightfall, but the inspection had taken longer than I'd intended.

I took a few steps toward one corner and peered around to look down the next street. It was empty.

"Spades!" I muttered, then stormed back into the apothecary.

"Inspector?" the young man crouched in the place where I'd dropped my clipboard. He held it out to me. "Are you well?"

"Yes," I said, snatching back my paperwork from his outstretched hand. Then I clamped my mouth shut for a moment while I steadied myself. "I'm sorry, I was just..."

I shook my head, collecting my thoughts. "Actually, I need to ask you some questions."

The assistant sauntered back to put the counter between us. He watched me through wary eyes. "If I can be of service."

"The customer who was just here. Who is he?"

The assistant frowned. "I'm not acquainted with him. He came in off the street."

I arched one eyebrow. "You didn't know him?"

A muscle in the man's jaw tensed, as though he was clenching his teeth. "Anyone may enter a store, Inspector."

I stepped up to the other side of the counter, looking him in the eye. I rapped my fingertips on the polished wood of the countertop. "You called him by his name. I surmised that you know him."

"His name?"

"You called him Raven."

"You must have been mistaken. I know no-one of that name," he replied, though I thought I saw his eye twitch.

I paused, watching him. He met my gaze, but I was sure he was lying. "Have you heard of the white rabbit?" I asked.

He paled slightly. I drew out the card that Raven had left for me in *The Tea Party*. "Do you recognize this motif?"

The young man shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't help you. If you have finished your inspection..." He looked pointedly at the clipboard clutched to my chest.

I bit the inside of my cheek. "For now," I said. "Unfortunately, there are some anomalies. I'll have to return soon."

The assistant crossed his arms across his chest, staring at me with an expression of disapproval. I gathered my things, put on my hat, and prepared to leave.

As I turned, I spotted a small vial of dark red liquid identified by a black label. There were no markings, except for a white line in the shape of rabbit ears. I turned back and grabbed it before the assistant could stop me.

“That’s not—”

“The white rabbit?” I said. The vial was marked with the same motif as on Raven’s card and on the walls around the city. “What is this?”

The man stood still; his thin lips pressed into a line. He didn’t answer.

“Did Raven leave this?”

The man’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “I don’t know Raven.”

I looked at the vial again, swirling the liquid around. “This is blood.” My eyes widened as I understood. “Black market blood.”

He clutched the edge of the counter and shook his head. “I don’t know —”

“You’re lying,” I pointed a finger at his chest and tucked the vial into my bag. “I’m taking this with me. When I return, I hope you’ll have enough sense to answer my questions.”

“You’re making a mistake,” he said as I put my hand on the door. I spun around to face him again. “Go back to your beauty parlors, dresses, and parties.”

I gritted my teeth, flushing at his insinuation. “Or what?”

“Or, you might find out what’s happening in this city.”

“Is that a threat?” I asked.

“Trust me,” he said. He walked around the counter to come toward me. I stood frozen in position, holding my breath as he approached. He stood too close, then reached out, as though to grab hold of me. I jumped out of his way.

He took hold of the door handle and opened it, motioning for me to leave. “You don’t want to know.”

16 AUGUST



I flicked open the case of Mr. Pillar's pocket watch as I waited. It kept perfect time, despite not being wound in the five days since Mr. Pillar had tasked me with "fixing" it. I flicked the lid closed again, then open, then closed as my thoughts turned like clockwork.

So many puzzles I'd barely slept last night thinking about them. I hated a puzzle that I couldn't solve. Now I had two.

First, this pocket watch that should not be working at all kept time with no winding.

Second, and more worryingly, the mysterious Raven, a vampire who was connected with black market blood, was also linked to the white rabbit. According to the man who'd petitioned Alice, the white rabbit associated with the Queen of Hearts, and was gathering her supporters. In Alice's office, the claim had seemed ludicrous. The Queen was dead. Now, I wasn't so sure—it made little sense, yet I was sure these things were all somehow tied together.

"Number 13," a feminine voice called out.

I looked at my ticket. 17. I sighed.

The vial of black market blood weighed heavy in my pocket. I'd made another visit to a blood bank—this time, the one on Seventh Street—to see if I could persuade anyone there to talk. I pretended to be a seller rather than announce myself as an inspector. In the last few days, people seemed more wary of inspectors than usual.

The scruffy woman who answered to number 13 shuffled through the sliding door, and I went back to flicking the lid of Mr. Pillar's watch. There was nothing wrong with it, and despite Chesh's suggestion that I break it

and collect Mr. Pillar's generous fee, the act of breaking a beautiful and antique pocket watch seemed wrong. No, after the blood bank, I planned to visit Mr. Pillar and return his watch, explaining that I could not take his commission.

Let someone else take a hammer to the watch if they had to, but it wouldn't be me.

The man next to me glared at me, so I slipped the watch back into my clutch and picked up the day's edition of *The Forge Hart* left on number 13's seat.

The front page blared: *Hearts Return!* An article followed that listed various sightings of robotic Hearts.

I frowned. At face value, sightings were increasing, but how many of these were eyewitness accounts, and how many were people who wanted their names in the newspaper? Still, after having seen one of the Hearts myself, I couldn't discount the story completely.

Another puzzle.

"Terrible, isn't it?"

A man leaned over my shoulder and jabbed a finger at the picture on the front of the paper. I murmured agreement as I noticed dirt underneath his fingernails.

"I didn't even want to come out of my house today, in case I came face-to-face with one. My neighbor was killed by one of them in the old days. You're too young to know what I'm talking about, but things were terrible back then. A Heart would kill you as soon as look at you if you got in their way. Terrible—if the stories are true... Where did it say they've been seen now? I'm making a list of places to stay away from. Mind if I look?"

I shook my head and handed over the newspaper, eager to extricate myself from the conversation. I smoothed my skirts and wondered how much longer I would have to wait.



"Number 17?"

I sprang out of my chair, waving my ticket.

I smiled at the older woman with a nametag that read Mrs. Sprick. "Eager, are you?" she said, mistaking my relief for enthusiasm. "Have you

visited us before?”

“No, first time.”

Mrs. Sprick raised her eyebrows. “We’ll see how eager you are next time, dear. Some people don’t like the needles much.”

I swallowed. I hadn’t planned to go through with the blood donation. I’d only wanted time to ask some questions. The idea of the needle made me break out into a cold sweat. “What exactly are you going to do?” I asked, stalling for time as Mrs. Sprick led me down a hallway into a small room. She gestured for me to sit down.

“Roll up your sleeve, please,” she said.

My mind went blank. I stared at the needle she pulled out of a box—she would jab it into me. The questions I’d prepared vanished from my mind.

“What happens to the blood?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. “After you... err, take it?”

Mrs. Sprick frowned at me. “Having second thoughts, are you? If you won’t let me prick you, then I’d rather you tell me now. I don’t want to waste my time when there are so many other people waiting.”

“No, no,” I stammered, stalling. “I’m just... interested”—I cleared my throat— “in the process.”

“You’re too pretty to be thinking about a career in the blood bank,” she said.

“Do you have any problems with black market blood?” I blurted out, leaning back subtly as Mrs. Sprick came towards me with the needle.

“What on earth are you talking about? Why would there be a black market when the vampires can get safe, regulated blood from the banks at a reasonable price? Roll up your sleeve,” she said. “Above the elbow.”

I fumbled with the button on the cuff of my blouse. My fingers weren’t working properly. Mrs. Sprick took another step forward, holding the needle up in the air to test it.

“Is there a lot of demand, at the moment, for... err, the product?”

“You *are* squeamish. Can’t even say the word. Blood. Is there a demand for blood? There’s always a demand for blood. Those vampires are a thirsty lot. Back in the day, a single vampire could hunt down dozens of people in one night. So, it takes multiple donations to quench their thirst. Will you please roll up your sleeve, miss? I can’t do this through your blouse.”

Mrs. Sprick huffed, then reached down to the cuff of my blouse to unbutton it herself. I shot to my feet, knocking over my chair, causing it to

clatter to the timber floor.

“Actually, I’ve changed my mind. I’ll be leaving.”



I was still breathing heavily when I entered the oldest quarter in Melfall. After leaving the blood bank at a run, I’d made my way to Mr. Pillar’s residence. As a member of one of the oldest families of the city, he lived in a grand house in the Hearts Quarter, once reserved for those supporters of the late Queen. Most of her supporters had renounced the Queen of Hearts after she’d died, but few had moved out of their stately homes.

I hurried towards the address that Mr. Pillar had provided when he’d left the watch with me. As I turned a corner, about two blocks away from Mr. Pillar’s residence, I found myself facing the late Queen’s palace. An ornate wrought-iron fence twisted into heart-shapes along the top, and beyond the fence, rows of red roses were in full bloom. I stopped in the middle of a driveway of white gravel running toward a fountain opposite the large doorway to her residence, the Palace of Hearts.

The gates were open. The fountain was running. Several groundsmen were tending to the roses. The gardens were neatly groomed, and the palace seemed full of activity.

Far too much activity for an abandoned palace.

I blinked. Nobody had lived here since the late Queen. If that was true, who was maintaining this place and paying the staff? Who was living here?

Another puzzle.

I forgot about my mission to return the pocket watch to Mr. Pillar as I took one step down the driveway. Then another.

Before I knew it, I was looking up at the fountain. It was a statue of the Queen of Hearts, water flowing from her outstretched hand, as though she was giving a gift.

“May I help you, miss?” A butler appeared next to me. “Are the Tweedles expecting you?”

The Tweedles, I thought. *Of course*.

“I imagine not,” I replied, peering around the doors. “I thought this place was abandoned.”

“Oh no, the Tweedles took up residence some years ago. They thought it was a shame to let such a historic building go to ruin.”

I pursed my lips. Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum were twin brothers and ardent supporters of the late Queen. They had given Alice lots of trouble, objecting to everything she’d tried to change within The Forge over the years and had become unofficial spokespersons for all opposition to Alice’s presidency.

“I would be very pleased to see what they’ve done with the place. Are they in?”

The butler bowed. “I shall announce you.”

The gravel crunched under my feet as we trudged around the fountain and up the steps to the entrance. The butler held the door open as I stepped inside.

“Wait here, please,” the butler said, turning on his heel to disappear into the house, leaving me in a hallway of black-and-white tiles laid out like a large chessboard. I tapped my foot, looking around at the large paintings on the walls—all of the late Queen in various poses.

She had the look of a queen—straight-backed with her head held high. Her crown rested on her black hair, pulled back from her face, and in every picture, she was dressed in red gowns, with stiff lace collars that stood straight up from her shoulders to frame her face. Her eyes were cold, and I had the impression that she was looking at me, watching me, where I stood. I shuddered, turning away.

A foolish notion, I thought. She’s dead.

Still, being in the palace, which was operating as though its owner had never left, was... disconcerting.

“Miss. Rowntree!” A chorus of two voices rang out as the Tweedles appeared at the top of the stairs. They were portly gentlemen, wearing bottle-green coat tails paired with gold waistcoats and black trousers. Their once platinum blonde hair was fading to white. The only difference between the two was that Tweedle Dee parted his hair on the left, while Tweedle Dum parted his on the right. At least, I thought that was it—or it might have been the other way around.

“Welcome to our humble abode,” Dee said.

“A pleasant surprise,” Dum continued.

“We weren’t expecting you,” Dee finished.

“I’m sorry I didn’t send word ahead, but I wasn’t expecting to come myself,” I said.

“How did you get here—” Dee said.

“If you weren’t planning to come?” Dum finished.

“I was running an errand in the area, and I noticed the old palace was bustling with activity,” I replied. “Isn’t it odd—the old Pinnacle clock starts working again, and now the palace is in use?”

“A mighty coincidence,” Dum said, with a smirk. He exchanged a look with his twin.

“A coincidence indeed.” Dee agreed.

“Anyone would think the two events are connected,” I said.

“They would?” Dee asked.

“Would they?” Dum asked, at exactly the same time as his brother.

I sighed. “Do you know anything about the clock?” I asked.

The Tweedles looked at each other, raising their eyebrows, grinning. When they turned back to me, they gave me innocent, wide-eyed looks.

“It’s tall,” Dee said.

“It’s round,” Dum continued.

“It’s got twelve numbers on its face and—”

“Two hands,” Dum finished.

“I mean, why has the clock started working again? Did you have something to do with it?”

“Us?” The Tweedles asked in unison.

I crossed my arms over my chest, staring at each of the brothers in turn. “Yes, you!”

“Not I,” Dum said.

“Nor I,” Dee added.

I hesitated, wondering whether there was any use in pressing them further.

“What about the Hearts? What do you know about them?” I persisted.

“Hearts are red,” Dee answered.

“And usually found inside your chest,” Dum finished. He turned to his brother and poked a finger at the middle of his chest. “And yours.”

Dee grinned, poking him back. “And yours.”

I took a deep breath and clenched my fists, fighting the urge to shake both of them. “You know what I mean. People have seen the Hearts in the streets of Melfall.”

“Have they?” Dum asked.

“They have?” Dee asked at exactly the same time.

“Surely, you’ve heard,” I replied. “Why are they here? I don’t believe you know nothing about it.”

“Neither do I,” Dee said, turning to Dum.

“Nor do I,” Dum agreed, facing Dee.

“It’s settled then,” the Tweedles said in unison, grinning back at each other.

“Shall we have a song?” Dee asked.

“No,” I replied, putting up both hands.

“Oh, yes, I love a song,” Dum replied, ignoring me completely. He turned to his brother. “Will you do the honor?”

“After you,” Dee said. They both linked arms and strode to the grand piano standing in the corner of the room.

“Wait!” I said, but it made no difference. The twins sat down in front of the piano and began playing a tune in unison with a flourish.

It had neither melody nor rhythm, but the Tweedles seemed very pleased with themselves.

I sighed, shaking my head. Conversation with the Tweedles was impossible. It was nonsense, or lies, or both. I was turning to leave when I spotted something on top of the piano.

A crown.

I blinked, then looked up at the painting of the late Queen in the hall.

The crown on the piano was exactly the same as the crown that rested on her painted head.

“What are you doing with the late Queen’s crown?” I said, pointing at it.

“Who me?” The Tweedles said together, looking at each other without pausing from bashing the keys of the piano. They looked from side to side. “Where?”

“There,” I pointed at it. “The crown.”

“Is it?” Dee asked.

“It is?” Dum said, at the same time.

“You know it is,” I said. “Where did you get it?”

“Must have been—”

“Lying around somewhere.”

I hesitated again. They were lying; I was sure of it, but there was no point hurling accusations. I tried one more question: “Are you working with

the white rabbit?”

The two men blinked at me, their song pausing mid-note. “White rabbit?”

“You heard me,” I replied. “What do you know about the white rabbit?”

The Tweedles looked at each other, their ‘song’ beginning again.

“The white rabbit,” Dum started.

I leaned forward slightly, hanging on his response.

“Is always late!” Dee finished.

I sighed, putting a hand over my eyes. I shook my head again, then turned to leave. “I’ll show myself out.”

“So long—” Dee said.

“Until we meet again...” Dum finished.

Both of the Tweedles burst out laughing as I turned away.

17 AUGUST



I ran my hands over the metallic curves of one of the two machines that stood in the midst of Chesh's workshop at the rear of the Emporium. With one larger wheel at the front and a smaller, but thicker one at the back, and a leather seat in the middle. The metal handlebars and bodywork gleamed, lovingly polished to a shine.

"Bicycles," Chesh said, beaming. "Mechanical bicycles. What do you think?"

I bent to look at the metal struts that joined the two wheels, then glanced at the engine. The bicycle *felt* right under my hands. I grinned back at my friend, then swung my leg over the bike, settled myself on the smooth leather seat, and gripped the polished metal handlebars.

Earlier in the day, I'd been in the President's Library, immersed in old newspapers trying to find out more about the clock, and the Hearts. Then, I'd started looking in the recent newspapers to see what I could learn about the vampires and the white rabbit.

The puzzles nagged at me. I wasn't sure whether the white rabbit's activity was just a rumor possibly started by an old supporter of the Queen, but I was certain that the vampire, Raven, existed. Something told me that finding Raven would help me fit all the other pieces together.

By the time Mr. Hopewell, Alice's butler, brought me a message, my eyes were tired from staring at the tiny print. I opened the message, which read, "I've a surprise for you. Don't delay, you'll love it, Chesh." Grateful for the interruption to my research and I was excited about Chesh's surprise, I left immediately.

When I'd arrived at the back door to the Emporium shortly afterward, Chesh ushered me into his workshop.

"Steam-powered bicycles," Chesh was explaining. "That's what I'm calling them."

I raised my eyebrows at him. "They're powered by a steam engine? Interesting." I tightened my grip on the handles. "Steam bikes," I murmured. "Can we ride them?"

Chesh pulled a leather cap down over his curly hair, then offered one to me.

He settled himself on the other steam bike, grinning from ear to ear. "I didn't bring you out here to sit on them," Chesh winked.

I pulled the cap on, fastening the strap under my chin. "How did they do in testing?"

"We're testing them now," Chesh replied. "Why, are you afraid that your magical 'knack' won't save you?"

I arched one eyebrow, then placed both of my hands on the metal casing over the engine and felt it thrumming. I could see, in my mind's eye, all the elements of the engine working together—each part in its proper place, serving its proper purpose—to make the machine *purr* like a contented cat. It *felt* right. I felt a surge of excitement for Chesh—the bikes were ready, and he might really be onto something worthy of Guild membership this time.

"I'm not afraid, if you're not," I replied, pulling the goggles over my eyes. I kicked the bike stand out of the way and revved the engine. "Follow me."

"Wait," Chesh called as I was about to start out of the back of his workshop. He tossed me a metal tube, which I caught with one hand. It felt cold.

"What's this?" I asked, raising my voice over the roar of the engines.

"Water," Chesh responded. "In case the bikes run out of steam. I've got some too."

I tucked the canister into the bag on the back of the bike. "Ready?"

"When you are." Chesh pulled his goggles over his eyes and revved his engine loudly.

I kicked off, and the wheels screeched as I sped out of the workshop and onto the street.

“Woo-hoo!” The wind tore at my hair as I motored down a backstreet. Several people jumped out of the way, shaking heads and fists as I rode past, but they were little more than a blur. I fixed my eyes on the street, as I felt the *thrum* of the engine beneath me, and the wind pulled at my clothes like I was flying.

At the end of the street, I slowed to a stop and looked back at Chesh. “Shall we take them around the city? Test them properly?”

Chesh grinned and revved his engine. “Ladies first,” he replied.

I needed no more encouragement. Taking a right turn, we tore down the backstreets where there would be fewer people milling about. I swerved sideways to avoid a downpour of wastewater as someone pitched it out of a second-floor window, then skidded to avoid several children playing hopscotch.

Winding our way through the backstreets, we traveled through the Diamonds Quarter, toward the docks.

When the water stretched out in front of me, I stopped again, letting the motor *hum* as I looked out over the water. The docks were one of my favorite places in Melfall. Ships came in and out from all over the Twelve Kingdoms, bringing spices from Badalah, dried fish from Atlantice, fresh flowers from Floris, potions from Arcadia, and countless other goods. I could see the marks on the different crates, denoting where they came from, but I’d seen no more of the Twelve Kingdoms than the marks on those crates. I watched as another sailor loaded boxes of machinery made in Melfall—I’d heard Alice mentioning a self-playing piano, a recent Guild-developed invention, which had quickly become highly sought after in the clubs of Renais, the capital of Arcadia.

Out of the persistent shadows of the buildings that towered over the backstreets, the overhead sun beat down on us. My leather cap and goggles now felt restrictive, and a trickle of perspiration ran down the back of my neck. I wished I’d brought my fan.

“Where to next?” Chesh asked as he came to a stop next to me.

“Let’s make a circuit around the inside of the wall?” I said, as my eyes trailed around to the large fortifications where the city wall joined the edge of the docks.

Chesh shrugged and revved the engine. “What are we waiting for?”

I kicked my bike forward again, and Chesh and I raced along the docks, skidding and swerving to miss the carts loading and unloading goods from

the ships berthed in the harbor. Several people jumped out of our way, yelling, but I lost their voices in the din of the engines.

As I approached the end of the docks, I took the wide road that ran alongside the first fortification that began the wall that encircled Melfall. The paved cobblestones made for a rougher ride than the timber docks, but I picked up speed and heard Chesh give an excited yell as he followed me. I looked over my shoulder to smile at him when something caught my attention in the edge of my vision.

A flash of red and white. I slowed, staring into the side lane.

A Heart.

The Heart was marching in the other direction, but it was unmistakable.

My breath caught in my throat, and, without hesitation, I swung the bike around, my tires skidded as I sped up onto the side road to follow it.

“What—?” Chesh yelled. I heard the squeal of the brakes behind me, but I didn’t look around. I couldn’t take my eyes off the Heart, in case it disappeared.

The Heart kept a good pace, but I was on a mechanical bike—it couldn’t outrun me. It didn’t look around, only trudged onward, oblivious to the noise the bike made as I followed. Perhaps it was oblivious to its surroundings—it was a machine, not a person, although its mechanical body resembled one.

As I got closer, I saw the arms and legs sticking out of its square body. Like a playing card, it had the heart motif and a number on its front, but on the back, there was a regular, gray geometric design like pressed metal.

If I could get close enough—or, better still, if I could lay my hands on the Heart—I could find out how it worked. If I understood its programming, I might discover why they’d suddenly appeared again. I might even find out who was controlling them. The elusive Raven flitted through my thoughts, though it was as much coincidence as anything else that the Hearts and the vampire were both puzzles that had appeared in my life at the same time. Then again, after my visit with the Tweedles, I wouldn’t put it past them to have set the Hearts loose as a prank.

I pushed the bike faster so that the buildings on either side of the narrow streets became a blur. I was gaining on the Heart when a yell surprised me from above, then a chamber pot of wastewater splashed on the street in front of me. I gasped, pulling on the brakes, then swerved to avoid the mess.

In front of my adjusted course, a door opened, and a woman with a baby on her hip stepped out of it.

My instincts kicked in, and I screamed at her, braking hard. My wheels squealed as the bike skidded. The woman stared at me, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, frozen in place. I was still moving too fast, heading directly for her. I pulled back on the brakes, as hard as I could, my eyes locked on the woman and her child.

Everything moved slowly.

The woman pulled the baby to her chest, opening her mouth to let out an ear-piercing shriek. The child screwed up its face and howled.

Directly overhead now, the midday sun cast a stripe down the middle of the street. The sunlight flashed off metal, blinding me for a moment. I held my breath, squeezing my eyes shut, then threw myself sideways to avoid the collision.

I hit the ground hard, groaning as the bike slipped out from underneath me.



“Ivy!” A voice echoed through the narrow street.

A moment later, there was a hand on my shoulder, and I was being turned onto my back. The bright sunlight shone straight into my eyes, making me blink, and obscuring the face staring down at me. Then the head moved, blocking the light. Chesh gaped down at me, the sun behind him shining a golden halo around his face.

“Are you all right? Answer me!” Chesh gripped my shoulders, his fingers digging into my flesh as he shook me. His eyes were wide, panicked.

“I’m all right,” I struggled to sit, sore down the side of my arm where I’d hit the ground. I looked at my arm—I’d grazed it, but the material of my coat, now torn at the elbow, had taken most of the blow. My eyes opened wide as I remembered the woman and child. “The woman. The baby? Did I...?”

Chesh shook his head, looking over at the doorway where the woman was clutching the baby to her breast. Even from where I lay, I could see she was trembling.

“Can you stand?” Chesh asked.

I nodded, and he helped me to my feet. I moved my fingers, arms, and legs, testing myself for injury. There was a scratch on my goggles, but other than the graze on my arm, I’d emerged unscathed. “Really, I’m fine. Just a little shaken.”

“What were you doing? I thought we were doing a circuit of the walls?”

I rubbed my throbbing arm. “I saw a Heart and tried to catch it.” I looked around for the place I’d last seen the Heart, but it was gone.

Chesh frowned. “What for?”

I shook my head, disappointment blooming in my chest. “To find out how it works.”

Chesh gaped at me, then pulled his cap off and ran a hand through his hair. The gesture made it stick up at an unfashionable angle. He shook his head, then pointed a finger at me. “Didn’t your mother tell you curiosity killed the cat? It almost killed you today.”

“It didn’t. I’m fine,” I replied. “Really.”

“I’m not,” Chesh said, but the edges of his mouth were already turning up into his trademark grin. He put a hand over his heart. “My heart might never be the same. I’m sure it stopped back there.”

I snorted, then stepped around Chesh and walked up to the woman, apologizing profusely as I approached her. She shrunk away from me, backing further into the open doorway.

I stopped, raising my voice to call to her instead. “Did you see the Heart?”

The baby started wailing again as it set eyes on me, and the woman shook her head, bouncing the baby on her hip.

“Where did it go?” I asked, but the woman had already shut the door firmly behind her.

I walked back to Chesh, who had stood up my bike and was checking it over.

“No permanent damage,” he said, rubbing at several scratches on the metal.

“Sorry,” I replied.

Chesh shrugged. “Perhaps we walk the bikes back?”

I hesitated. “Just give me a minute, would you?”

I walked up to a group of people who had appeared in the narrow street, likely drawn by the unusual noise. They watched us, openly curious.

“Excuse me, have any of you seen a Heart passing this way?” I pointed in the direction it had taken. “Did you see where it went?”

People frowned, suddenly wary at the mention of the Heart, and moved away. I sighed, returning to where Chesh crouched next to the bikes.

“We should go back,” he said.

I looked down the street one more time, hoping for another glimpse of the Heart, but it was empty. I looked back at Chesh and shook my head.

“Let’s keep going—but slower this time, I promise,” I replied, swinging my leg over the bike before Chesh could object.

I kicked the bike into action and took us back towards the wide road that ran along the inside of the city walls. We rode at a more sedate pace, and though I searched the streets for any sign of the Heart, I didn’t see it again.

However, as I rounded the corner, moving into the Spades Quarter, I saw something else that made me stop.

Across the road, on the wall of a shop, the white rabbit motif was painted. This time, the rabbit seemed to be looking around a street corner. When Chesh came to a stop next to me, I pointed to the street where the shop with the white rabbit on it was.

“Let’s take a trip down there,” I said. “I’ve never been there before.”

“I would hope not—that’s the beginning of the vampire quarter.” Chesh gave me a strange look. “What’s down there?”

I shrugged but didn’t take my eyes off the white rabbit. “We won’t know until we find out.”

“You almost killed yourself back there. Now you want to tempt the vampires?”

“It’s the middle of the day. There won’t be vampires around. You’re not afraid, are you?” I wiggled my eyebrows at him.

Chesh opened his mouth to protest again, but I kicked my bike into action and turned into the vampire quarter.



As promised, the streets were empty. I was being more careful, since throwing myself off the bike earlier, but I could have used as much speed as I wanted here. There was no-one around to run into.

The Spades Quarter, or vampire quarter as it was unofficially known, was a very old part of town. Narrow, three-story townhouses stood right next to each other, as though the houses leaned on each other for support. The shutters on the windows were closed, keeping the light from entering the rooms inside. Still, despite the closed windows and absence of people on the streets, I had the eerie feeling of being watched.

At street level, shop windows displayed their goods, though none were open. There were shops selling clothes, shoes, and hats, shops selling furniture, both new and antique, and shops selling watches, machines, inventions, and many other curiosities. There were no food shops, no bars, and no blood banks. I noticed all the shops were on the pricier end of the scale, catering to the renowned wealth of the vampires who gathered to live in this quarter of the city who had owned their property for generations, and who had had centuries to amass their fortunes.

I slowed, getting off my bike to admire a range of hats in a shop window, *Cappello's Finest Hats*.

I thought of Pearl as I saw one particular item in the window. A fascinator decorated with flamingo feathers in different shades of pink so that the feathers spread out like the brim of a hat over her face. I reached out to touch it, but my fingers came up against the cold glass.

The shop wouldn't open until nightfall, according to the sign on the door. I stepped back, knowing the fascinator would look magnificent on my twin and wishing Pearl was with me to see it. I knew she'd never come into the Spades Quarter.

Perhaps I can bring one to her, I thought.

I looked around, trying to spot a street sign so I might make my way back here when the shop was open when I spotted a small, white rabbit painted on the bottom corner of the shop. It was sitting, staring straight out like it was looking at the passers-by walking down the street. As though it was watching me.

I stepped toward it, reaching out to touch it when Chesh's voice made me jump.

"Are we going to get going?" Chesh said. "This place gives me the creeps."

I had a prickly sensation on the back of my neck, though I didn't want to admit it. Though eerie, this part of the city was fascinating. Not only was

the architecture older than what I had seen before, but this white rabbit was teasing me. Twice now, I'd seen it painted on the walls.

The petitioner had said the white rabbit was gathering the Queen's supporters. The vampires had been supporters of the Queen during her reign. Was it a coincidence that I saw the painting of the white rabbit in a place where most of the city's vampires lived?

I pressed my lips together, frowning as my mind worked over the puzzle while I got back on my bike. I rode slowly for another few blocks, my eyes roving at street level for any more signs of the white rabbit. Twice more, I spotted more paintings—each white rabbit in a different pose. Sometimes painted as though it was running down the street, or peeking around a corner, or entering a rabbit hole, with only its fluffy tail on view.

I thought again of Raven's card, with its white rabbit motif on the back: *We choose our future.*

I remembered the vial of black market blood. There was some connection between the blood, the white rabbit, and the mysterious vampire. The puzzle, it seemed, wouldn't leave me alone until I solved it.

The sun was dipping lower in the sky when we finally drove out of the vampire quarter and into the more familiar parts of the city. Chesh seemed happier the further away we rode from the Spades Quarter, but I felt my mind returning there—to the white rabbit, and to the mysterious vampire that haunted my dreams.

As we headed for home, we rode through the marketplace where the Pinnacle clock ticked ominously.

Tick, tick, tick.



"I want to get a present," I said to Chesh as we walked the darkened streets.

"For whom?"

"Pearl. I saw a fascinator earlier that she will absolutely love." I didn't tell him where I'd seen the hat or the other reasons I wanted to return there. I knew Chesh wouldn't agree to a journey into the vampire quarter to look for more paintings of the white rabbit. Or to find a particular vampire.

Chesh slowed his pace, putting a hand on my arm to make me turn around. "It's too late. The shops are closed."

I held my breath and looked him in the eye. “Not where we’re going.”

Chesh blinked at me as comprehension dawned on his face. “No,” Chesh shook his head. “No, no—it was bad enough during the day. I’m not going back. Let’s go to a bar and get a drink instead.”

“Sure. Let’s do that,” I smiled, looping my hand around his elbow. “After we get Pearl’s hat.”

Chesh opened his mouth to object, but I cut him off.

“Come on—you won’t make me go on my own, will you? Please?” I squeezed Chesh’s arm, but he wouldn’t move. I hesitated a moment, then used a phrase that Chesh had said to me many times: “You’re my lucky charm.”

Chesh glanced at me, his eyes going wide with surprise. Conflicting emotions played over his face. Finally, Chesh pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed in resignation. “The things I do for you,” he said. “Let’s get this over with.”

We walked into the Spades Quarter, and a smile spread over my face as I took in the almost unrecognizable streets. The quarter was very different from when we’d been there during the day.

Above us, street lamps shaped into bats in flight were casting their lamplight over streets full of people. It was almost as though it *was* the middle of the day. Shops were open, tearooms, restaurants, and bars were full, and people—vampires, mostly—strolled the streets. Everyone was well-dressed. Everyone glowed with an ethereal beauty.

I tried to look everywhere at once, entranced by the sights of the evening, but also checking every shop wall and street corner for signs of the white rabbit.

Chesh fidgeted beside me, constantly looking over his shoulder. I squeezed his arm. “This way,” I said, pointing towards a side street. “Another block over.”

I stepped into the side street, while Chesh hung back a moment. Behind me, he sighed, and his footsteps rang out on the cobblestones as he followed.

The side street was almost empty, except for a figure in the shadows who leaned against a wall, smoking a pipe. I didn’t pay much attention to him as my eyes fixed on the snippet of a busier street at the end of the lane, which was—I was sure—where I’d seen *Cappello’s Finest Hats*.

I didn't look at the figure until I was almost past him. As I walked past, I glanced at him, and my heart raced. Outwardly, I froze.

His eyes were bloodshot and sunk deep into their sockets, with heavy purple smudges beneath them. His pale, almost-translucent skin stretched tight over his bones like a walking skeleton, and he hunched over, as though it took too much effort to stand up straight.

My throat swelled so I could barely breathe. Blood rushed in my ears. A prickling sensation raised along the back of my neck, then spread until the skin all over my body was tingling.

I'd never met a vampire, but it didn't matter. Instinctively, I sensed danger. This one was thirsty.

The vampire sneered, and his thin lips stretched over sharp teeth.

I forced myself to move, clutching Chesh's arm, as I started walking faster. Without a word passing between us, I knew that he'd seen the vampire too. Chesh matched my step.

Suddenly, the vampire was standing in front of us.

He sniffed the air.

"Fresh blood," the vampire whispered, his eyes drifting to where my blood pulsed in the vein in my neck. I stepped away from him, and he smiled again, wider this time, deliberately showing his fangs. "We get little fresh blood in these streets at night."

"Leave us alone," Chesh said, trying to move around the vampire. "This young lady is the daughter of the President."

The vampire raised an eyebrow but didn't step away. His eyes roved over my face and body, and I saw his nostrils move slightly, as though savoring my smell.

"You? You're the daughter of the woman who is starving my kind?"

I took a step backward as did Chesh in front of me, although I knew it was pointless. From the very little I knew of vampires, they moved faster than the human eye could see.

I pinned my glare on him, determined that I would not blink and find his fangs piercing my throat.

"What are you talking about?" I asked my voice wobbling as I spoke. "President Rowntree is not doing anything to your kind. She was the one who ensured constantly available blood supply through the blood banks."

The vampires gnashed his teeth, showing his fangs. His blood-shot eyes darted this way and that. "Available? No one can get blood now. They

locked down the blood banks.”

I shook my head. “I visited a blood bank yesterday. There are enough stocks for anyone wishing to buy.”

“Plenty of stocks for your eyes, but when my kind goes there, we get turned away. No more blood, they tell us.”

I tilted my head to the side, frowning as I considered the vampire’s information. There was no need for him to lie, but I knew it wasn’t the truth. Still, that petitioner had seen a vampire come out of the blood bank, claiming that it looked as though the vampire was still thirsty. There was no reason for that petitioner to lie either. Could it be true?

“It’s been a long time since I had fresh blood,” the vampire continued, and his words brought me back to my immediate danger. “I don’t go hunting—not since the Blood Accords—but when such a delicious meal comes to me, how can I refuse?”

“Ivy, run!” Chesh pushed me behind him, giving me a shove. But the vampire was quicker, grabbing the front of Chesh’s shirt in his fist and throwing Chesh against the alley wall before I could move.

Suddenly, the vampire was behind me. His breath tickled the soft skin on my neck where my blood was pounding underneath my flesh. Goosebumps raised over my skin.

“I prefer my meat beautiful,” the vampire whispered. “And female. The women are always softer, and their blood is so, so sweet.”

I closed my eyes and saw the flash of fangs, a memory of the dream I’d had over and over again. I spun around to face the vampire, backing away. He laughed.

“Always fun to play with my meal, too, my dear,” The vampire said. “I forgot how much less fun it is to get blood from a blood bank. There’s no thrill in sucking blood out of a tube. It doesn’t run, or fight, or plead. The blood is missing the tang that comes from the rush of adrenalin coursing through the body at the point of death. So, by all means, run—I’ll get you in the end.”

My breath came in short gasps, and I wiped my palms against my skirts. He was right—I could never outrun him, nor fight him off. Even malnourished, he was faster and stronger than any human.

My feet were planted on the cobblestones, and, though my thoughts were screaming at me to run, I couldn’t move.

“Chesh, you go,” I said. “Save yourself.”

Chesh was picking himself up from the ground, stumbling sideways a few steps before leaning against the wall, rubbing the back of his head. "I won't leave you."

"Don't be ridiculous," I retorted. "Go. Tell Mother everything."

I didn't look at my friend as I couldn't take my eyes from the vampire standing in front of me. However, I could see his figure out of the corner of my eye. He hesitated, looking from the vampire, to me, then back again.

"I don't think—" he started, but I interrupted him.

"Go!" I yelled.

The vampire only laughed as the sound of Chesh's footsteps echoed in the alleyway. "Too bad, your lover couldn't save you."

"He's not my lover," I replied, squeezing my fists. My mouth went dry as the vampire stepped toward me again.

"Does he know that?" the vampire purred. The pupils of his eyes widened, and he licked his lips. He took another step toward me, and I fought against a sudden urge to run, knowing it would only hasten my death. As soon as I tried to get away, the vampire would pounce.

I swallowed, seeing the hunger in his eyes. I thought of the vial of black market blood and played my only card.

"Why can't you get blood from the white rabbit?" I blurted out.

The vampire hissed and stopped advancing, his eyes narrowing. "What do you know about the white rabbit?"

"I know that Raven is distributing it. The white rabbit's blood," I said, sensing that my statement had rattled the vampire, but my breath caught in my throat as I spoke again, grasping at straws.

The vampire's eyes narrowed further, the corners of his mouth drawing into a frown that covered his teeth.

"How do you know Raven?"

I swallowed, wiping my hands on my skirts. I cast around for an answer. "He bought me a drink," I replied.

The vampire raised an eyebrow. "Did he?" His voice had a dangerous edge.

"Actually, I've been looking for him," I said, lifting my chin and straightening my shoulders, hoping to convince the vampire I wasn't afraid of him at all.

The vampire grinned, then in a flash, he grabbed me by the throat and pushed me up against the wall of the alley. I gasped for breath as his fingers

dug into the flesh of my neck.

"You lie," he whispered.

I tried to shake my head, but the vampire held me too tightly. "Please..."

The vampire chuckled. "Your blood will taste so sweet," he said.

"I'm not lying."

"Raven doesn't buy drinks for the daughter of the President," the vampire hissed, pressing me hard against the wall. The cold of the bricks seeped through my light summer coat.

"He did. At *The Tea Party*," I said. "A bar in—"

The vampire narrowed his eyes again. "I know the one."

I tried to nod, but he squeezed my throat tighter. I couldn't breathe. Dark spots formed at the edge of my vision as the world narrowed to the sight of his face—his dilated pupils, his thin lips, and sharp fangs.

I tore at his grip with one hand, kicking out at him in desperation. It wouldn't be much longer before I passed out. "Please..."

As everything swam in front of my eyes, I remembered the bottle of blood that I'd taken from the counter at the *Ace of Spades Apothecary*. I quickly dug my hand into my clutch, pulling it out and waving it in the air.

"Raven gave me this!" I hissed.

The vampire's head snapped around to look at the vial without loosening his grip on my throat. My eyes bulged, and my chest was on fire as my body demanded air.

Suddenly, with no warning, the vampire let go of me and stepped away. I crumpled to the ground, sinking into the folds of my skirts, gasping and rubbing at my neck.

I didn't even notice that I'd lost hold of the vial until the vampire spoke again. I looked up at him and saw him holding up the vial in front of him. It was empty.

The vampire licked the last trace of blood from his lips and sighed. His skin seemed less gaunt, the shadows under his eyes were less pronounced.

I opened my mouth to protest, then clamped it shut again and crawled away from him in the direction where Chesh had disappeared.

The vampire's face whipped around to see me, then before I could blink, he was next to me, his fingers in my hair, yanking it back to expose my neck.

He took a long breath as he trailed his nose down my neck. “You would have been sweeter, but I won’t cross Raven—just in case.” He let go of my hair, standing to take a few steps away. “If you were a wise woman, you would leave this quarter, and never come back.” Then he chuckled. “I sense you’re not wise, so since that blood took the edge off my thirst, I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

I was breathing hard, cowering against the wall, wishing the vampire would leave. What was it I wanted to know? My mind felt so fuzzy now that I couldn’t remember.

“To find Raven, you must follow the white rabbit.”



“What?” I blinked, but the vampire was gone. There was no trace that he’d even been there, except for the empty vial lying abandoned on the cobblestones.

I buried my face in my hands, taking a few deep breaths to steady myself. Then I clawed at the wall, forcing myself to stand. I couldn’t stay in the vampire quarter a moment longer.

Putting one foot in front of the other, I forced myself to run toward the end of the alley where Chesh had disappeared. I burst out onto the street, stumbling sideways as the darkness fluttered on the edge of my vision again.

“Are you all right, Inspector?” a voice spoke into my ear. I stumbled away, but a hand on my arm steadied me.

I crashed into someone else, who shouted an exclamation, but it sounded very distant to my ears.

Suddenly, a strange face came into my line of vision. A man with a scar down the side of his face. His mouth was moving, but I couldn’t make out the words.

“Please...” I said. “I need to get back to the Palace.”

Or at least, I think that’s what I said because after that, the darkness closed in on me and I slipped into unconsciousness.

18 AUGUST



Alice sat on the edge of my bed; her mouth turned down at the edges as she watched me. A bowl of steaming broth balanced on a tray on my lap. The scent of it made my stomach rumble. I lifted a spoonful to my mouth, and the warmth of the liquid spread through my body as I swallowed.

“I’m all right, Mother,” I said.

“What were you doing?” Alice clucked her tongue, glaring at me. “I checked with your supervisor—you weren’t working. Why go into the vampire quarter at night?”

I slowly savored another mouthful of broth to give myself time to answer the question. Then I cleared my throat.

“Chesh and I passed through the Spades Quarter unexpectedly yesterday—during the day—and I saw a hat for Pearl. The shop wasn’t open then, so we had to go back during business hours.”

Alice’s eyes narrowed, and she pressed her lips into a thin line. “You risked your life for a hat? Forgive me, Ivy, but that isn’t like you.”

“Not just a hat—a present for Pearl.”

“Pearl would rather—” Alice started.

“A present?” Pearl interrupted as she stepped into my bedroom. “For me? Where is it?”

I smiled at my twin sister, for once relieved at her sense of timing. “I’m afraid I didn’t buy it. I was...”

“The man who brought you back here said it looked like someone had attacked you,” Alice said. “Is that true?”

“A petty thief,” I lied. “I tried to fight him off, but I took a blow to the head, then he took the contents of my purse.”

“Yet, the thief didn’t take your clutch?” Alice raised an eyebrow.

My stomach sank as my eyes slid over to see my clutch lying on my bedside table, next to a vase with a single red rose in it. I had opened my mouth to ask about the rose when Pearl laughed.

“Not a clever thief,” Pearl said, then leaned over the other side of my bed and adjusted my pillows.

Alice gave Pearl a disbelieving look, then glared at me.

“I promise, Mother. I’m well. There’s no need to keep me in bed. I won’t collapse again.”

“What happened to Chesh?” Alice asked. “Why didn’t he bring you back?”

My mouth fell open as I remembered my best friend. “I... He... err... hasn’t called?” Sunlight was streaming in the windows. I’d slept in—it was late morning, at least.

“No, he hasn’t.” Alice’s voice was stern. “I told the staff you are not well enough for interruptions.”

“Mother, I’m perfectly well,” I protested.

“You heard her, she’s perfectly well,” Pearl said, turning to smile sweetly at Alice. “Well enough to accompany me to my hair appointment this afternoon.”

Alice opened her mouth, but Pearl reached out to take her hand. “Don’t worry, Mother. I’ll take good care of her. I won’t let her out of my sight. We’re only going to *Lola’s Luscious Locks*. It’s barely two blocks from the Palace.”

I turned to Alice, squeezing Pearl’s hand gratefully. “I can’t possibly keep to my bed all day, Mother.”

“Besides,” Pearl added. “It’s almost a crime to let Ivy continue to go about with this hair.” She made a face as she pulled at a strand of my hair. I put a hand to my hair and felt the mess of tangles. I hadn’t been in any state when I’d come to bed the night before to attend to brushing out my hair. “I’ll send ahead and make sure they have space for Ivy to get a treatment too.” Pearl smiled at Alice, then spun to me.

“It’s settled then.” She picked up the tray still heavy with a half-full bowl of broth and set it down on a table closer to the door.

“I was eating that,” I said, still holding the spoon.

Pearl rolled her eyes as she pulled back my blankets. “Get dressed. We leave within the hour.”



Lola massaged my scalp, working the shampoo through my hair as I let my eyes drift closed.

“Ivy needs a change,” Pearl said, as she lounged on the seat next to me, foils wrapped all over her head as three different shades of blonde dye set into her hair. “She’s had this hair for too long.”

“No longer than you,” I murmured without opening my eyes. “I think we both had hair when we were first born.”

“No, that was you,” Pearl interrupted. “According to Mother, you were born with a head of black hair, and it took me almost a year to grow any at all.”

“I’d roll my eyes if I could be bothered opening them,” I said, lulled into a dreamy state by Lola’s fingers.

Lola laughed but didn’t stop rubbing the tips of her fingers in small circles over my scalp. “It’s not going anywhere, darling—don’t worry! We’ll just add something a little extra, that’s all.”

“I’m thinking new color and new cut,” Pearl said.

“I’m not sure—” I started.

“Absolutely,” Lola replied to Pearl, while completely ignoring me. “Something bright. With her skin tone, she could go bright red or even white blonde. Both would look fantastic.”

“Blonde,” Pearl said. “We should look like twins for once.”

“Wait a—”

“And I’m not dying my hair that mousy brown color,” Pearl interrupted again, as though I hadn’t spoken.

Lola clucked her tongue. “No, darling. You don’t have the skin tone for it. Don’t worry, Ivy will be fantastic as a blonde.”

“Does anyone care what I think?” I said.

“No,” Pearl answered. “Keep your eyes shut—we’ll tell you when to open them.”

My eyes flew open, and I saw myself in the mirror, foaming soap all over my wet hair. “What?”

Lola laughed. She tilted my head back to pour warm water over my hair, making me feel drowsy. “I won’t do anything to you that won’t look fantastic. Trust me—my job is to make you look beautiful.”

I sighed and obediently closed my eyes, as Lola rinsed the last of the shampoo from my hair.

“As for the cut, I’m thinking short,” Pearl said.

“What?” I said, my eyes flying open. Pearl wagged a finger at me until I pursed my lips but closed my eyes again.

“She always wears it pinned back. I think you should cut it to the line of her jaw. I saw another woman with a similar style at Mrs. Bancroft’s Parlor—it made *her* face too round, but on Ivy, it would be perfect.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Lola said, moving around me and pulling on the hair on either side of my face. “Yes,” she replied, slowly, as she pulled on different sections of hair and twisted them around her fingers. She sounded thoughtful. “I think it would work.”

“You don’t sound very confident,” I nodded, keeping my eyes tightly shut.

“Honestly,” Pearl said, and I imagined the eye roll that I knew matched her tone of voice. “You go gallivanting around the Vampire Quarter at night, but you won’t try a new haircut!”

“I wasn’t gallivanting,” I replied.

“The Vampire Quarter?!” Lola exclaimed. “You’re not being serious, are you? I’ve had clients telling me terrible things about...” Lola lowered her voice to a whisper. “vampires. There isn’t enough blood, and they’ve gone back to their ways from the time of the old queen,” Lola hesitated, and I imagined her looking over her shoulder to check that the late Queen wasn’t standing behind her. “Biting people!”

“No,” Pearl gasped. “Who?”

“I can’t name names,” Lola replied.

“Do you know anyone who has been bitten?” I asked.

“My clients know people, who know people,” Lola said.

I didn’t answer, but I mulled over this information while Lola snipped at my hair. I’d almost been bitten last night and, though I hadn’t met many vampires who had wanted to drink my blood, I hadn’t met many vampires.

“I have even heard rumors that the Queen is still alive,” Lola said, without raising her voice. “That she’s coming back.”

“Really?” Pearl asked. “But that’s not possible. She’s dead. Mother always said so. Didn’t she, Ivy?”

I murmured agreement.

“What about the Hearts, and the Pinnacle clock, and the vampires? It’s all signs that the Queen is returning. Is our President worried about having to face the Queen of Hearts again?”

“The *late* Queen,” I replied. “She’s dead. And no, Alice isn’t worried about her. She’s worried about people panicking over a few strange coincidences.”

Lola hummed, but I could hear the doubt in her voice. As her scissors clipped at my hair, I turned over the puzzles in my mind.

The clock. The Hearts. The blood banks. Raven. The white rabbit.

Wait...

If Lola hadn’t been cutting my hair, I might have shot out of my chair. The vampire had told me something last night about Raven and the white rabbit. Something that linked them together. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block out the conversation between Pearl and Lola about the latest fashion in hats.

Something about Raven and the white rabbit, I told myself. *Think!*

“Am I hurting you, darling,” Lola tilted up my chin, and I opened my eyes, shaking my head.

“I’m just thinking,” I replied.

“Is this your normal thinking face?” Lola seemed concerned. “You’re a clever girl, and I know you think a lot, so please take my advice—don’t screw up your face like that when you’re thinking.”

Beside me, Pearl was shaking with contained laughter.

“You’ll get wrinkles,” Lola continued, with no hint of humor. “Follow my advice—you’ll save a fortune fixing your skin in the long term.”

I smiled, letting my eyes drift closed again. My mind grasped onto what Lola had just said: *Follow...*

I sucked in a breath and held it. The word sparked a vague memory. Just before the vampire had disappeared, he’d told me how to find Raven: *Follow the white rabbit*.

I let my breath out slowly, considering the vampire’s words. I had assumed that the painted motifs were just decoration around the city, but maybe someone had painted the white rabbits for a reason—to lead somewhere.

The first one I'd seen, across from the First Forge Bank, wasn't far from here, and I suddenly wanted to run outside to see if I could find it again.

Lola put her hands on my shoulders. "Are you all right, darling? You're tense. You're fidgeting. Just relax—I'll do a beautiful job on your hair. Don't worry."

"Sorry," I replied, sighing, as I sank back into the chair again. I pressed my hands to my skirts, so they lay flat against my thighs. I took a deep breath through my nose, then exhaled out of my mouth.

"Honestly, Ivy, anyone would think we're torturing you. It's a *hairstyle*," Pearl said. I opened my eyes to glare at her. This time, I didn't have to imagine anything—I saw her roll her eyes at me.



I stared at the reflection of myself, my mouth hanging open. I reached forward to touch the mirror, just to make sure it was really me. My fingertips touched the young woman who stared back at me.

At me.

My now blonde hair fell to my jawline, with my bangs cut straight across to sit just above my eyes.

I looked amazing.

Lola walked over to the hatstand where I'd left my hat when I first came in. She turned it over in her hands, before fixing it at an angle on my head. Then she stepped back and put her hands on her hips as she examined me. "Perfect."

"Beautiful," Pearl agreed with a smile. She came to stand next to me and rested her hand in the crook of my elbow. "See, we finally look like sisters."

"Thank you," I turned to Lola, feeling myself blush. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

Lola shrugged. "I'll forgive you—this one time. Next time, you'll trust me."

"I promise."

As we stepped out of *Lola's Luscious Locks*, Pearl leaned closer to me. "Honestly, that cost me almost half of my beauty stipend this week. I don't know how much the Bank thinks we have to pay for service in this city, but

they're not paying enough to keep people looking their best." She glared at a passer-by, whose hair was turning gray and whose buttons were strained over his stomach. "That's why there are so many more people around who look rough around the edges. Does nobody care about appearances anymore?"

At the corner, Pearl turned toward home, but I pulled her to a stop. I thought about the white rabbit painting across from the First Forge Bank. I had to follow it if I wanted to find Raven.

"We don't need to go straight home yet, do we?" I asked.

"Don't you need to rest?" Pearl said, "I told Mother..."

"Don't fuss—I'm fine," I replied. I put a hand to my new short blonde locks. "Actually... this new haircut has me feeling brave. I thought maybe..." I searched around for an excuse. "A tattoo might complete the look?"

Pearl's mouth fell open. "You're seriously suggesting that you want a tattoo?"

Inwardly, I felt uncomfortable with the idea. Outwardly, I shrugged one shoulder. Pearl squealed and grabbed my hand. "If I'd known a new haircut would make you see reason about such things, I would have slipped something in your drink and dragged you to Lola's years ago!" A delighted smile spread across her face. "I know just the place."

"Is there a place you usually go to? In the Hearts Quarter?" I said, trying to remember the tattoo parlors she'd pointed out to me in the past.

"Even better, there's a great place near to here. I promised Mother I wouldn't take you far."

I hesitated. I needed to get back to a place where I'd seen a painting of the white rabbit. "You promised Mother you wouldn't leave my side," I replied. "I'd rather go to the best place, rather than a second-rate place just because it's closer."

Pearl looked shocked. "Do you really think I'd frequent any establishment that was second-rate? Honestly." Pearl flicked her freshly curled hair over her shoulder and pulled on my arm, forcing me to follow her. "Besides, I need a new tattoo, too. We should get ones that match."

I bit back my normal retort, hoping I'd get the chance to change my mind by the time we got to the tattoo parlor. Instead, I smiled. "Do you have anything specific in mind?"

Pearl's eyes lit up, and she outlined all the ideas she had for twin tattoos. I hummed and murmured at all the requisite intervals, but I wasn't listening. Instead, I searched the streets for any sign of the white rabbit.



The name of the tattoo parlor was spray-painted on the window—*Colorful Joker Tattoo Art*. Pearl gripped my arm, squealing in excitement as she tugged at me. I pulled back, still searching the street for the white rabbit.

I hadn't seen a single painting while we'd walked from Fifth Avenue to the tattoo parlor on Third Avenue. It was on the edge of the Hearts Quarter, but not far enough into the quarter to be close enough to the First Forge Bank to see the white rabbit painting.

I pulled back against Pearl. "I'm not sure about this."

"You're not having second thoughts. I forbid it," Pearl said, her hands on her hips. "You can't get my hopes up like this."

"We've talked about this. I've told you how I feel about tattoos," I reminded her.

"You might have talked, but you made little sense," Pearl retorted. "I didn't agree with you. I absolutely insist that you get a tattoo. You won't regret it."

"I might."

"I was right about the haircut."

I pursed my lips, trying to stifle the smile that was creeping over my face. "You were right," I admitted. "But I'm not getting a tattoo."

Pearl rolled her eyes. "As you wish. You still have to come with me. Like you said—I promised Mother that I would stay with you. *I'm* going, and I'm not letting you wander around on the streets by yourself."

This time, I pursed my lips out of a faint sense of annoyance. I wanted to keep looking for the white rabbit, and for Raven, but Pearl was the reason Alice allowed me to leave my room. I relented and stepped into the *Colorful Joker* after Pearl.

The tattoo artist greeted Pearl with a kiss on her fingers, as though they were old friends. They started talking animatedly about a tattoo design.

I wandered around the shop, looking at the sketches that the artist had tattooed onto other customers.

“Behind my shoulder,” Pearl was saying. “I want it to peep out when I wear an off-the-shoulder gown to parties. Just a suggestion of what’s hidden underneath.”

The artist started sketching up some designs, as I wandered away from where they were talking, studying the artist’s work.

“... thinking about twin tattoos, but she’s got cold feet...” I glanced over my shoulder to see Pearl glaring at me and the tattoo artist watching me with raised eyebrows. I bent over to examine some drawings more closely, pointedly ignoring Pearl. I had to admit, some of the art was very good. I spotted an amazing clockwork design and bent closer to study it.

Despite what I told Pearl, I had nothing in particular against tattoos. I just didn’t want to be rushed into a decision. If I was going to permanently mark my skin, I wanted to make sure I’d found the right design. Unlike Pearl, I wanted my tattoo to mean something—not be just another way to improve my “look.” Still, the clockwork design gave me an idea. Perhaps I could draw a pocket watch design, and the tattoo artist could...

There was a scuffle at the back of the tattoo parlor, and raised voices floated out. The tattoo artist apologized to Pearl and hurried back, opening a door to a darkened back room.

“Look at this!” A male voice was raised loud enough for me to hear now that the door was open. I glanced up to see a figure standing in front of the tattoo artist on the other side of the half-open door.

“There are sometimes complications with the procedure,” the tattoo artist explained in a whisper.

“Complications? It looks like I’ve got a skin disease. I can’t go out like this.”

There was a pause, and I strained to hear what was being said.

“Give it some time, the rash might settle down.”

“Time? It’s been like this for days. I have a party coming up. I can’t wait any longer. Besides, it’s so itchy, I’ve wanted to rip my arm off.”

“It can get itchy. Have you—” the tattoo artist said. He glanced over his shoulder, suddenly noticing that the door was still ajar. I focused on the clockwork design, hoping he wouldn’t think I was listening to his conversation.

He drew the door almost closed, and the sound of shifting feet on the floorboards drowned out the rest of his question. I shook my head, looking away from the design. Perhaps I’d been right all along—perhaps a tattoo

wasn't for me. I vaguely wondered if Pearl knew about these "complications."

"I'm not asking for your apologies," The muffled voice raised another notch. "I want you to fix it."

"All right, wait here."

The tattoo artist jerked open the half-closed door and marched into the front of the shop. He stepped up to the front door, opened it, and whistled.

A grubby street urchin appeared from nowhere. My mouth dropped open. I'd never seen a child so dirty and dressed in rags. The tattoo artist slipped a card out of his pocket and gave it to the child.

As it passed from his hand and into the child's dirty fingers, I saw the white rabbit design. I blinked, and when I looked again, the card had disappeared beneath the child's torn shirt.

The tattoo artist came back into the shop, and, without a word to the man waiting in the back of the shop, he put a smile on his face and walked back to Pearl.

"So sorry to keep you waiting. This was the design you wanted?"

"I can't decide between this one, and..."

I shut out the details of Pearl's conversation and stepped up to the shop window, searching the street for the child.

I ground my teeth in frustration, unable to see any sign of him.

If you want to find Raven, you must follow the white rabbit.

"Sit down, Ivy," Pearl said, over her shoulder. "This will take a while."

I sighed, wondering if I'd just missed my opportunity.



I stared out of the window, sunk in an armchair at the front of the shop. I'd turned it around so I could see out, as I searched the passers-by for the street-urchin. The tinkle of a doorbell startled me out of my reverie.

Another customer stepped into the shop. I casually glanced over to see who stepped in.

I froze, and my fingers dug into the arms of the padded chair where I'd been sitting for the last half-hour. My heart raced, and every particle of my body tingled in response to the sight of the man who'd just entered.

Though I only saw the side profile of his face, I knew.

This was the vampire I'd been dreaming about for a week.

I wasn't sure whether I felt anticipation or fear. I put one hand to the soft skin at the base of my throat, as though checking I hadn't been bitten yet. No—still safe.

Part of me wanted to run.

Another part wanted to reach out to him.

It made little sense. I should fear him—especially after my near-attack in the Vampire Quarter—but I watched him and felt a sense of wonder about this man who had visited my dreams.

Does he know me? I wondered. *Did I visit his dreams in the way he visited mine?*

I couldn't draw my eyes away from him. I studied his profile—the straight line of his nose, the square cut of his jaw, the way his black hair fell to brush his jawline, and his skin, like starlight. From my dreams, I knew he was a handsome man, and my vantage point confirmed it.

Involuntarily, my body shuddered, and I gripped the armchair once more as I tried to work out whether my body reacted with fear or desire.

“Raven?” The tattoo artist attending to Pearl's newest tattoo called out to the vampire, now standing in the middle of the shop floor. He jerked his head towards the door in the back wall. “Out back. Don't come through the front door again.”

My mouth dropped open as I stared openly at him. *Raven?*

One piece of the puzzle that had worried me for days was standing in front of me.

Here was Raven.

The vampire who had haunted my dreams.

The man who'd bought me a drink at *The Tea Party*.

The one who'd left me a note.

He knows me.

I swallowed, my breath coming in shallow gasps as the pieces of the puzzle came together.

Raven didn't even glance at me as he tipped his hat to the tattoo artist, then disappeared through the back door, closing it behind him.

My mouth was dry as I stared at the door behind which Raven had disappeared.

“Ivy?” Pearl's voice was laced with worry.

I tore my eyes from the door and looked at her. The tattoo artist was bent over the back of her shoulder, inking the exposed skin. Her mouth was pinched, and she frowned.

“You’re very pale. Are you all right?” Pearl asked.

I blinked, barely understanding her as I marshaled my courage.

Raven is here. This is my chance to meet him.

I shouldn’t leave. It’s too dangerous.

I must.

The armchair scraped against the floorboards as I stood suddenly. “No.”

“You look like you will faint.”

I started shaking my head, swaying on my feet.

“Please sit down, I won’t be much longer,” Pearl begged. She frowned over her shoulder at the tattoo artist as he worked on her. “How long?”

The tattoo artist sucked on his teeth as he looked down at his unfinished work. “Half an hour. Maybe more?”

“See?” Pearl said. “Then I’ll take you home.”

I shook my head more firmly. “No, I have to go now.”

“I’m only half-way through. I can’t leave yet,” Pearl protested. I held up a hand to dismiss her worries.

I took a deep breath to steady myself and forced a smile to my face. “I’m fine. I’ll make my own way home.”

Pearl looked doubtful, but the tattoo artist had put his magnifying glasses back on as he leaned closer to the back of her shoulder and jabbed her with another needle. Pearl hissed as she drew in a pained breath.

“I promise. I just need to lie down, that’s all. I’ll go straight home.”

I didn’t look back as I took my hat from the hat stand, pulled open the door, and stepped out onto the street.

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The Kingdom of Fairytales authors hope you enjoyed this new way of reading. We don't think that a series has ever been set with one chapter a day thought a whole year before and we hope we did it justice.

With this in mind, please leave a review, but when you do, remember that these books were always meant to be short breaks in your day and the blurb reflects that.

We would LOVE it if you can drop us a few words on Amazon

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THE KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES TEAM

These books would not be written without a great many people. Here is our team:

Many thanks to those who have made this possible.

Thank you to Rhi Parkes without whom, this series would never have come about.

Thanks to all the authors.

J.A. Armitage, Audrey Rich, B. Kristen Mcmichael, Emma Savant, Jennifer Ellision, Scarlett Kol, R. Castro, Margo Ryerkkerk, Zara Quentin, Laura Greenwood and Anne Stryker

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Nadine Peterse-Vrijhof, Diane Major, Kalli Bunch and Stephanie Pittser.

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Gigi Nickerson, Amanda Hurst & Coralee Butterfield

ABOUT J.A. ARMITAGE

J.A lives in a total fantasy world (because reality is boring right?) When she's not writing all the crazy fun in her head, she can be found eating cake, designing pretty pictures and hanging upside down from the tallest climbing frame in the local playground while her children look on in embarrassment. She's travelled the world working as everything from a banana picker in Australia to a Pantomime clown, has climbed to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro and the bottom of the Grand Canyon and once gave birth to a surrogate baby for a friend of hers.

She spends way too much time gossiping on facebook and if you want to be part of her Reading Army, where you'll get lots of freebies, exclusive sneak peeks and super secret sales, join up here

<https://www.subscribepage.com/v7o8k4>

Somehow she finds time to write.



ABOUT ZARA QUENTIN

Zara Quentin is a fantasy author, book lover and traveller. Raised in Adelaide, Australia, Zara grew up with a strong sense of adventure, which she inherited from her parents, who took her and her sister on trips to the United States, Europe, and Asia.

She also inherited a love of reading from her mother. Throughout her childhood she explored fictional places through books, and in particular, through fantasy novels. She'd turn the black and white text on the page into the colourful worlds of her imagination. Later, she put pen to paper and started creating her own.

After graduating from high school, Zara studied at the University of Adelaide and has lived in France, London, and Auckland, New Zealand. She is always determined to stimulate her imagination with as much travel as possible, spending time in Europe, the United States, southern Africa, Morocco, Peru, the Pacific and south-east Asia.

Zara now resides in Melbourne, Australia with her husband and three children. She is the author of the Airwoman series, and is currently working on a brand new project.